



# The organization of a first-class sporting event



We analyze the keys that have made the US Tennis Open the event with the biggest audience attendance in the world and how is the organization of a first-class sporting event with Deepak Trivedi, a consultant in strategic management and a collaborator of the United States Tennis Association

**T**he **US Tennis Open** is one of the best sporting events on the planet. It has the highest audience attendance in the world of all competitions that are played at a single event. The last Grand Slam of the season brings together the best tennis players in the world and its organization has also been, for many years, an example of everything that a great first class sporting event should be. On and off the court.

A half smile must have appeared on the face of **Justin Timberlake** when he saw that in the ticket sales ranking of [TicketNews](#), the [US Tennis Open](#) had outsold him three months before it was due to start. The singer from Memphis, who has just started his American tour with his 'Man of the Woods 2018 Tour', is a regular at the **Arthur Ashe Stadium**, the center court of the spectacular **Flushing Meadows** complex where the US Open is held. He could not have been at all surprised by the exquisite taste of New Yorkers when it comes to deciding, one more year, on which show to spend their money. Or of the tourists attracted by the appeal of the 'Big Apple'. The US Open is a show, a must among all the entertainment on offer in New York during the summer season.



Jimmy Fallon and Justin Timberlake dance to 'Single Ladies' during the Men's Singles Quarterfinals match of the 2015 US Open \* Photo: Getty

To learn some of its secrets, we spoke to **Deepak Trivedi**, a global sports management consultant specializing in tennis events and the Olympic Games. He was our guest in an exclusive webinar for students and alumni of the **Johan Cruyff Institute** on how to organize a world-class sporting event.

## THE EXPERT



As well as a strategic management consultant, **Deepak Trivedi** is also an educator, adviser and conference speaker. His professional career has led him to work together with very influential people in the world of business, professional sport and hospitality. A highlight in his career is his consulting work for some of the most prestigious sports organizations in the world, such as the NBA, the USTA and the International Tennis Hall of Fame at the Olympic Games in London and Rio. As a teacher, he is director of strategic sports, hospitality and tourism, and sport marketing in MBA programs in London, Paris, Singapore and the United States.

More than 700,000 people visit the facilities of the **Billie Jean King National Tennis Center** in New York every year to experience the US Open. In 2007, it first registered over 700,000 spectators and, since then, it has only fallen a little short of the mark on three occasions: 658,664 spectators in 2001, 691,280 in 2015, and 691,143 in 2017. But the record year is still 2009, when a bright young **Juan Martín Del Potro**, only 20 at the time, defeated the great **Roger Federer** in a dramatic final lasting more than four hours: 721,059 people attended that year to witness Del Potro's path to the final, and 23,200 packed into the Arthur Ashe Stadium center court to see him win the first Grand Slam of his career, putting an end to Federer's five consecutive US Open titles since 2004. On its front page on the Monday after the final, The Telegraph ran the headline 'The New Kid on the Block' to describe the event.

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"The pressure to make the US Open a top event is huge because 80% of the revenues generated during the competition are reinvested in tennis programs throughout the country, at both professional and amateur levels. The higher the revenue, the greater the capacity to invest in the development of the sport in the United States", explains Deepak Trivedi. This explains why, at last year's event, up to 85 American players (men and women) qualified to compete in the competition, almost 40% more than in 2013. The work of the USTA to promote its sport is more than evident and its efforts to ensure that its big showcase continues to attract the attention of fans, sponsors and other stakeholders are tireless and highly professional.



Serena Williams, an icon of American tennis and all over the world \* Photo: Edwin Martinez from The Bronx via Wikimedia Commons

Everything is millimetrically calculated so that the numbers keep growing. It is no coincidence that the US Open, the longest-running tennis championship in the world (its first edition was in 1881), has been the last Grand Slam of the season since 1987. Nor is it by chance that, as a two-week competition (the last week of August and the first of September), it coincides with the celebration, on Monday of the second week, of Labor Day in the United States. At the level of innovation, its facilities are also a reference. In 2006, the US Open was the first Grand Slam to introduce the Hawk-Eye technology that was gradually adopted by the vast majority of ATP venues. There is also a retractable roof to protect from inclement weather, in three of its main courts -the Arthur Ashe Stadium with capacity for 23,771 spectators, the Louis Armstrong Stadium, with 14,000 more seats, and the Grandstand, with 8,000 seats-.

The complex is huge, with 22 courts in total -the four main ones, 13 more adjacent courts and another five intended only for training-. And the quality control is exquisite: the surfaces are resurfaced every year before the big event to guarantee the best playing conditions and all have lighting to ensure the best television coverage and extend the day into the night. The activity is frantic during the 15 days of competition and spectators can choose not only the rounds they want to see according to their budget, but also between morning and night sessions. Filling the venue in the morning and then renewing the public in the afternoon in a complex of these characteristics does not seem to be a problem for the organization of the tournament, but to do it successfully is something very few are capable of.

*In 2017, the hashtag #USOpen took the record of the entire season of Grand Slams, with a total of 38 billion impressions*

Content about the tournament is not lacking either: in 2017, on the social networks of the US Open—Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube—there were 3,800 pieces of content that generated 18 million interactions and 92 million video views. The hashtag #USOpen took the record of the entire season of Grand Slams, with a total of 38 billion impressions. Traffic on its digital platforms - usopen.org and US Open App - accounted for more than 10 million new users during the tournament with a total of 46 million visits and 366 million clicks on pages. Of all the digital interaction, 73% was via mobile phones.

All the figures are amazing when we talk about the US Open. Beginning with the prize money: \$50.4 million is the total to be distributed. The singles champions win a whopping \$3.7 million each; the doubles champions win \$675,000, and the mixed doubles winners receive \$150,000. The rest is distributed in the previous rounds. The champions today win 25 times more than those who won in 1973, when the prize money for the individual champion was \$25,000.

*"We have a special department that looks after the celebrities who visit the President's Box. It's publicity for them and for the tournament"*

## THE BRAND IMAGE

The US Open is unique for many reasons, but they all revolve around its brand image. "The French Open, or **Roland Garros**, for example, is associated with the **sophistication** of French brands such as Chanel, Lacoste, Perrier. At **Wimbledon**, its whole image revolves around **history** and **tradition**; it is the only tournament in which players are required to wear white, to maintain a neat image on a freshly watered grass court, and there are very few logos around the court that distract attention. And the **US Open** is impregnated with the **personality of New York**; it's about getting attention, and the more the better", explains Deepak. "So we do not try to replicate what the other Grand Slams do, but give the US Open the unique atmosphere that you find when you visit New York. It's easier to sell New York than to sell only tennis. You offer a big show - the central Arthur Ashe Stadium, the largest tennis court in the world with capacity for 24,000

spectators; morning and evening sessions, with matches that can be extended until the early hours of the morning; and a diversity of seats to choose, from a seat worth \$70-80 to the \$5,000 or \$10,000 that it costs to rent the boxes or the hospitality suites. For the US Open, all spectators are important, regardless of what they spend on their entrance tickets, but the way we communicate with them is different".

## **US OPEN AND CELEBRITIES: A 'WIN-WIN' RELATIONSHIP**

The relationship between celebrities and the US Open is 'win-win'. Both feed off their power of attraction and enjoy the experience: the tournament, through appearing in music, fashion and other magazines; and celebrities, through letting themselves be seen and promoting their latest works with their mere presence in the boxes of the Arthur Ashe Stadium. "We have a special department that looks after the celebrities who visit the President's Box. It's publicity for them and for the tournament".



## **THE IMPORTANCE OF THE OPERATIONS AND VOLUNTEER TEAMS**

New York did not escape the fury of Hurricane Irene in August 2011, which struck the East Coast of the United States. Flushing Meadows suffered the throes of the devastating storm and the preparations were affected. "We had problems with the closing of airports in New York. We did not know which players were already in the city and which were not. The alerts warned that the storm would hit New York on Saturday and the tournament was beginning the following Monday. In normal conditions, you need about two weeks to prepare the venue: the work in the stands, all the food and drink on offer, merchandising stores, etc. And when everything was ready, we had to ask the installation staff to take it all down in less than 24 hours. The storm passed and the damage was minimal, but we had only 24 hours to put everything in order and start the tournament. That's when you realize again that having the right team of professionals in the right position is crucial to guarantee the organizational success of an event of this kind. We knew that for the 40,000 people who had bought their tickets to watch tennis on Monday morning that was exactly what they wanted to do. They did not care about what might have happened 48 hours earlier. Nor should we forget that the press loves negative stories and we could not risk reading incendiary headlines to announce the US Open".

In equal measure, the volunteer team is important in any event. "Not only because they are people who spend many hours working without being paid, but because they are a very important part of the team and, after all, act as ambassadors for the tournament. It is important to give them tasks in which they feel valued and access to areas where they can recover and also watch tennis in their moments of rest".

*"More than 65% of global sponsorship goes to sport and agreements are usually long-term"*

## **THE RELATIONSHIP WITH MERCEDES, RALPH LAUREN AND EMIRATES**

The relationship with the sponsors and their exposure at the tournament also differentiates the US Open from the other Grand Slams. "We know that the public that attends the US Open is 50% men and 50% women and, in a cosmopolitan city like New York, that gives our sponsors a great relevance and radius of action", explains Deepak. Mercedes-Benz is the car supplier of the US Open. Their campaign is not limited to displaying their logo in promotional material of the tournament, but to filling the city with their best models. "Mercedes knows that it will not sell cars at the tournament, but it will have an impact on those customers who believe they share the same values as the brand. Everyone who enters Flushing Meadows sees the latest model of the brand; in the streets of New York you can admire their vehicles and at the entrance of the 5-star hotels in Manhattan where the players stay, etc. Two basic aspects should be taken into account when we talk about sponsorship and sport, more than 65% of global sponsorship goes to sport and agreements are usually long-term. So you have to make sure that in that agreement you meet all the requirements that will make that brand want to associate with your event for five years or more. And that's very important because Mercedes compared sales in the New York area between the months of October and January (the three months after the tournament) before its sponsorship, with those during five years of sponsorship of the US Open and, thanks to those results, they have kept their commitment to us".



"Ralph Lauren has the exclusivity as a clothing supplier, so that all tournament officials and ball boys and girls wear their brand, the players receive clothes in their rooms and Ralph Lauren has access to the entire US Open database".

Recently, Emirates replaced US Airlines as the official airline of the tournament, one more step in the airline's sponsorship strategy. "It was very interesting to see how we could activate that sponsorship because Emirates is not an American company. Emirates gives priority to quality and comfort whatever your seat is in the cabin, and at the same time believes in a top-quality service, brand values that it shares with the US Open. So we proposed to set up some 'suites' in the style of airport lounges where customers could get to know Emirates destinations, their culture and their standards of service. Knowing and responding to what is important for a sponsor helps you make a proposal tailored to their needs".

## **CONNECTING WITH FUTURE GENERATIONS**

The United States Tennis Association had access years ago to a survey about the profile of people who practice sport in the country, and the results were like a bucket of cold water: 55% played basketball, 71% played baseball, 77% were dedicated to hockey and 89% to football. So, the president of USTA at that time, Jon Vegosen, asked the US Open

organization to take into account this tendency when it came to promoting its flagship event. "We discovered that tennis accounted for 29% of the total and that there was a great disconnect between being the sporting event with the greatest attendance in the world and one of the sports with the lowest number of participants for the rest of the year", explains Deepak. And they started working at the base, with children. This is how the sponsorship with **Nickelodeon** came about, the children's television channel with the biggest audience in the United States. "Other sports such as those mentioned above had been adapted to the scale of the youngest. Even in countries like England, France, Spain or Italy, they had incorporated mini tennis courts, sponge balls, etc., but the United States did not. The partnership with Nickelodeon was a good opportunity to start adopting that model. Also, the introduction of the **Arthur Ashe Kids' Day**, a day when stars like Rafa Nadal, Serena Williams, Roger Federer, or celebrities like Bradley Cooper or One Direction would participate in promotions with children on the center court".



Another age group on which the US Open places special interest is the 21-40 group, demographically another strong group in the New York environment. The introduction of the '**Rock the Set Concert**' was a success when it came to bringing the tournament closer to "professionals who are in New York for business or groups of teenagers so they can enjoy, get to know and connect with the US Open".

## THE IMPACT ON TELEVISION

One of the highlights of the US Open takes place before it begins and is the announcement of the draws. Also on this occasion, the tournament organizers sought the best channel to get attention, and that was none other than appearing on the prime-time program of ESPN. "It was a discovery as in the case of Nickelodeon. We saw that **ESPN** was the most watched sports channel in the United States and '**Sports Center**'

its most popular program. So the US Open draw has been announced on that channel and on that program every year since 2011".

*"The use of iPhone and Android applications has increased by 173%"*

## **INTERACTIVE PUBLIC AND FAN ENGAGEMENT**

The work at a great sporting event does not end with the handing out of the trophies, the analysis of data is almost as important to guarantee the success of future editions.

"Statistics tell us a lot and some that have impacted us the most in recent years are those about the behavior of the public that comes to see us. The use of iPhone and Android applications has increased by 173%, so enhancing interaction with the viewer is crucial in an event like ours. We know that people can use up to three devices at the same time: they watch a live match, while they listen to the commentary of another through the headphones that American Express provides, and check the results on other courts on their mobile or iPad. That tells us that the US Open consumer is very interactive. So we decided to put microphones in the boxes of the players to bring them even closer to the action. We also have **'premium apps'** so that, for example, those customers who are in the suites or boxes can buy what they want without sacrificing the comfort of their hospitality and receive their purchase minutes later".

## **WEBSITES AND MERCHANDISING**

Websites continue to have great relevance, despite the strong entry of mobile apps and social networks into the digital environment. "More than 70% of entrance tickets are still acquired through traditional websites, so we can't think they are an obsolete medium". E-commerce is basic and we must make sure that we have items of all prices because, once you put the US Open logo on it, everything gets sold. Some people do not want to spend \$50 on a T-shirt, but they do want to have something to remind them that they've been to the US Open. We did a marketing test with a small rubber duck that cost \$8 and we managed to sell 5,600 units. If you have a well-positioned brand and you know who your audience is, put the logo on it because you're going to sell it".

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The US Open is an ideal case study to learn about all the operations involved in the organization of a major sporting event. Some 65% of global sponsorship, as we have seen, goes to sport, but that doesn't mean that finding a sponsor is easy. Building a strong brand and consolidating it over time is one of the keys. And, knowing how to nurture it to reach excellence, that is the question.

**NOTE: DEEPAK TRIVEDI IS NOT SPEAKING ON BEHALF OF THE USTA BUT AS A SPORTS MANAGEMENT PRACTITIONER AND ACADEMIC.**