

Branded Content, Consumer Insights Underpin Sports Strategy: Turner's Tina Shah

Bringing live sports back to television last year was a herculean effort that challenged broadcasters, sports leagues and advertisers to pivot quickly to engage with fans. Turner Sports, the division of AT&T's WarnerMedia whose network brands include TBS, TNT, TruTV and AT&T SportsNet, pushed through the pandemic's disruptions as a major provider of sports entertainment.

"Our strategy has been: How do we engage with sports fans in different ways? How do we work with our league partners on safety protocols, and how do we make sure we're adapting our broadcasts in a way that's been safe?" [Tina Shah](#), executive vice president and general manager of Turner Sports, said in this interview with Beet.TV.

Turner was one of the broadcasters that televised games from inside "the bubble" the National Basketball Association set up to isolate teams and countless support crew as they restarted the regular season.

"We had probably the most unprecedented level of collaboration with the league that I've ever seen," Shah said. "We were essentially lockstep, trying to figure out how to create an engaging end to the season while still keeping all of our personnel, athletes and our broadcast personnel safe."

Turner worked with sponsors to develop innovative campaigns that could be activated within the confines of the arenas that were mostly empty. That included the courtside experience for Anheuser-Busch's low-carb beer brand Michelob Ultra, which gave fans [a way to virtually "attend" games](#).

'Always-On' Investment for Advertisers

Providing a way for fans to remain engaged has been a key strategy, especially as athletes take a more active role in managing their personal brands. Concurrently, fans also want the power to control the experiences of accessing sports-related content.

"Real-time access has enabled fan relationships to continue to be really strong even in the absence of gameplay," Shah said. "Fans want to watch, when they want to watch, on their own terms."

Advertisers can find ways to parlay that engagement with the "opportunity for an 'always-on' investment, whether the games are on or not," Shah said. "We've historically had large-scale media partnerships that are multifaceted with advertisers that really let us establish a lot of trust with the advertiser, and get a deep understanding of their goals, and really tailor solutions that meet their needs."

Developing branded content and providing data insights gleaned from AT&T, which has a massive database of consumer information, were two ways that Turner Sports distinguished its platforms for advertisers, Shah said.

Its advertiser toolbox [includes Playmaker](#), the in-house agency for Bleacher Report, to develop marketing programs aimed at Generation Z and millennial consumers.

Branded Content, Social-Minded Shows

Turner Sports also hosted two rounds of “The Match,” a charity golf event sponsored by Capital One, that was the most-watched [golf telecast](#) in the history of cable television. An average of 5.8 million viewers tuned into to see star athletes Tiger Woods, Peyton Manning, Phil Mickelson and Tom Brady face off in May. Mickelson and Manning returned in November [in a match](#) featuring Charles Barkley and Stephen Curry.

“We configured them to support the times we were living in: raising funds for COVID-19 relief, highlighting historically black colleges and universities and also raising money for their golf and sports journalism programs,” Shah said. Turner Sports also contributed “millions of meals to Feeding America to help those struggling with food insecurity...proving the point that doing well and doing good don’t have to be mutually exclusive.”

Turner Sports developed programming to address racial inequality after the killing of George Floyd during an arrest led to global protests. Those programs include “The Arena” and “Take It There” to provide in-depth discussion with Black athletes about weighty social issues. TNT experienced double-digit gains for its NBA broadcast on Martin Luther King Day on Jan. 19, according to Nielsen data [cited by SportsMediaWatch](#).

“Sports always has been at the forefront of social activism,” Shah said. “With all the challenges and continuing the conversations around race and inequality, we want to continue to create content that fans are really passionate about.”

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