

## How to Build a Brand from Scratch

Vegas Golden Knights CMO Brian Killingsworth on using a community-first approach to launch a brand

By Al Mannarino (Adweek)

*As part of the CMO Reboot Playbook: [Activating Brand Purpose](#), Vegas Golden Knights CMO Brian Killingsworth shares how the team went from hyper-local to global in less than a year by digging in to the roots of their city and leading with innovation.*

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*This transcript has been edited by Adweek and may not reflect the video-recording exactly.*

### THE CHALLENGE

Our journey starts in June of 2016, when we were awarded the franchise from the NHL. We didn't get a logo until November 2016, and we didn't even have players until June 2017. We went eight months without having any true assets to promote or to really tell our story, but I think that gives teams an advantage because they can establish their tone on social and establish who they are as a brand.

### THE APPROACH

#### **From Hyper-Local to Global**

We decided to create this irreverent fun brand. It's easy to make fun of teams and to call them out when you can't back it up with wins on the ice. That helped us establish a following from day one even before we had any players. As our general manager, George McPhee, said from the start, the logo was the face of the franchise and it was important as an expansion because in year one nobody really gave us any opportunity to do well. We were the underdogs, so we said from day one the logo is going to be the face of the franchise. We didn't want to put one individual player over another in any of our marketing outreach.

Then the team took off. They were "The Golden Misfits" and we went on a 10-game win streak. Suddenly, we're sitting there at the halfway mark in first place and so we had to shift gears. We had a hyper-local approach to launch the brand from the start and focused on our season ticket base that was about 90% local from day one. Then we became every teams second favorite so you talk about the markets throughout the world and the underdog story was something that created this worldwide following. We had to shift gears to take advantage and capitalize on this worldwide. We went from the expansion team underdogs to going all the way to the Stanley Cup finals in year one.

Although we lost the Stanley Cup to the Washington Capitals, we found out that fans in over 100 different countries purchase Golden Knights gear. We realized right away that we went from a hyper-local brand to a global one in one year.

#### **Colors Maketh Brand**

Picking the right colors are crucial in building a brand and launching it. We had our owner, Bill Foley, work with Adidas and the NHL to develop what he saw as an iconic look that was still traditional. He wanted the Knights base color to be gray, similar to the look of battled armor. He also wanted gold to represent the opulence of Las Vegas and red to be an accent color bringing out the Red Rock mountains.

We also wanted to be different and luxurious. It's not really a phrase you hear in a company with a hockey team that often. We wanted Las Vegas to be represented by this team from a luxury standpoint. We also were the first team to unveil white gloves. It was important to him that when you are flipping through games on TV, that you knew the Vegas Golden Knights were on the ice. That was crucial and so our jerseys reflect that as well. We are proud that it's very iconic to Las Vegas.

When we launched it was important to come up with a mantra. We are proud to be Vegas' first major professional sports franchise and we celebrated it. Not many markets as big as Vegas and as well-known and are without a major professional sports franchise. We figured that was a true competitive advantage for us. We came up with a mantra of "Vegas Born." We truly are a franchise that's Vegas born and no matter whoever comes after us, we can say we are the first.

## Community First Approach

### Community First Approach

- Street Hockey initiatives with CCSD
- Vegas Born Babies
- Youth Hockey/Try Hockey for Free
- VGK Foundation



On top of that we started with building a community-based approach. It was important for us to develop youth programs like our street hockey initiatives where we taught PE teachers in the Clark County school district how to play hockey. We were able to use the Golden Knights as the platform to reach more than 200,000 kids in their PE programs. We took it a step further where we introduced a Vegas Born Baby program in hospitals, because we think it's important that the first piece of clothing to go to your baby is a Vegas Golden Knights onesie.

Another key component is the Vegas Golden Knights Foundation. We've given out over \$3.2 million in the community to local nonprofits, focused on youth, education, homelessness, and hunger. It's important for us to really make a difference when we launched, we wanted to do it big as you've seen at any of our games or anything you've read about us.

## Be Bold with Your Brand Launch

When we launched we really wanted to make it big, loud, and bold. We wanted to represent Vegas. It's Vegas, baby. You have to do it big. When people ask what's the hottest show on the strip, we wanted the answer to be going to a Vegas Golden Knights game and we tried hard to focus on that as our directive.

We pulled celebrity influencers that have residencies on the strip involved in our game day. Lil John and Travis Barker performed a pregame concert. We put a Golden Knights jersey on Lady Liberty at New York, New York. We worked with the Nevada highway patrol and put our logo on the hood of cars. We also had a chocolate statue of Marc-André Fleury in the Bellagio. We tried to look at the grassroots tactics to make things big and bold.

## THE IMPACT

### **Building a Lifestyle Brand**

We quickly became a licensing arm. It was crazy how fast our merchandise took off. We spent a lot of our time building out that lifestyle product. We launched a gold Jersey, which seems like a no-brainer for the Golden Knights, but it was something that we unveiled after year three. We wanted to really push the envelope with that. We have suits, champagne, bathrobes, and cigars all with Golden Knights logos. For us, it's about taking it to the next level.

We want kids to feel like they can one day play for the Golden Knights if they get on the ice here in one of our programs. We showed the progression of a baby with a Vegas Born onesie graduating into some of our learn to skate programs, getting on the ice, playing street hockey, playing at UNLV and then becoming a Vegas Golden Knight.

We just acquired the San Antonio AHL franchise and launched in our market, the Henderson Silver Knights. Henderson is a community that's about 16 miles Southeast of the city, so it's right in our backyard and an emerging community. There are only 320,000 people that live in the community of Henderson and the residents there feel like it's a separate area from Las Vegas. There's tremendous pride in being from Henderson, Nevada. Similar to our Vegas Born campaign, we launched a Home Means Henderson campaign. That is our mantra going forward.

We had to launch this during the pandemic and there were a lot of grand plans that we had, but for us, it was to go digital first. We had some pretty good success, launching it across a number of different platforms that we own and control like Facebook, Twitter, Twitch, and YouTube. We also talked to our local NBC affiliate and worked with them to have an hour long window with programming throughout. They just took our feed from our desk and it did a three rating. They said it really competed with Wheel of Fortune and some of the other higher rated programs that night.



We also wanted the Vegas Golden Knights and the Henderson Silver Knights to have some relatability within the same family. If you look at some of the intricate details there, the horse is what is represented with this logo. It's an armored war horse that was instrumental in the medieval times for a knight in their quest to become elite. The golden eyes pay homage to the parent club in Vegas. We wanted the players that played for the Henderson Silver Knights to always be thinking about one day becoming Golden Knights. It gave its own unique identity and that allows us to really have some fun with Knights hockey.

#### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Have a start-up mentality:** You need to stay nimble and quick to react and to be able to respond.
- **Define your north star and big rocks:** For us, it's to be champions on the ice and in the community while always advancing forward.
- **Lead with innovation:** It's important not to be afraid to fail.
- **Stick to your brand mandate and have fun:** Stay true to that brand and always try to have fun with it.
- **Celebrate the goal horn:** Small wins lead to big wins.