

SPORTS

Luxury labels make a swing for fan engagement at US Open

August 27, 2019



Sloane Stephens participates in the #ServeLikeSloan AR experience at the U.S. Open. Image courtesy of Mercedes-Benz

By SARAH RAMIREZ

Luxury brands are leveraging the U.S. Open to engage with tennis fans, turning to innovative experiences in an effort to connect with consumers watching the tournament live and on television.

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For the 51st U.S. Open, the United States Tennis Association hosted its first-ever fan week, welcoming crowds to experience brand activations and watch qualifying matches at the Billie Jean King National Tennis Center in Queens, NY. Mercedes-Benz and IHG Hotels & Resorts were among the brands that partnered with tennis stars and used fan week as an opportunity to offer fans experiential activities.

"Mercedes-Benz prides itself on delivering only the best or nothing' in automotive performance," said Monique Harrison, head of brand experience marketing at [Mercedes-Benz](#), Sandy Springs, GA. "The U.S. Open shares this very value, showcasing the best in men's and women's tennis competition on a national stage."

Taking the court

German automaker Mercedes-Benz, which has sponsored the U.S Open since 2010, worked with 2017 U.S. Open champion and brand ambassador Sloane Stephens to create a fan experience centered around MBUX.

MBUX is the Mercedes' virtual assistant that controls varying aspects of newer models. Similar to Amazon's Alexa or Google Assistant, MBUX also has Internet access.



All Open attendees can participate in the Mercedes-Benz AR experience. Image courtesy of Mercedes-Benz

Open to all attendees at the Open, Mercedes' new augmented reality experience guides guests through a virtual tennis lesson with Ms. Stephens. While standing near a tennis net and facing a large screen, attendees can initiate the experience by saying, "Hey Mercedes, teach me to serve like Sloane."

Mercedes partnered with Helios on the AR experience. The automaker's engineering team recorded MBUX phrases exclusively for the #ServeLikeSloane experience, such as telling visitors that their play is "as hot as the last U.S. Open."

This is Mercedes' first consumer-facing AR project, and an effort for the automaker to engage with consumers outside of the vehicle. The project is also an opportunity for Mercedes to collect consumer information for future leads, since guests have to provide their contact details and automotive interests before participating.

"We are always striving to create consumer experiences that allow our current and future customers to interact with the innovative technology they will find in every Mercedes-Benz vehicle," Ms. Harrison said. "We found it only fitting to recreate the ease of interacting with a Mercedes-Benz in an immersive, lighthearted environment like the AR experience we developed for the U.S. Open.

"The experience gives us an opportunity to tell a story and cut through traditional advertising tactics to reach our consumers," she said.

Hospitality group IHG Hotels & Resorts brought a spa experience to Flushing Meadows for its inaugural year as a U.S. Open sponsor.

Attendees can participate in a complimentary "digital daydream" experience, enjoying a temple massage accompanied by soothing footage, sounds and scents from select IHG properties. IHG also partnered with retired tennis player Andy Roddick for an exclusive practice clinic at the USTA Billie Jean King National Tennis Center.

Both the Mercedes and IHG fan experiences run through the tournament's conclusion on Sept. 8.

U.S. fashion label Ralph Lauren is returning as the official outfitter for the U.S. Open, continuing a partnership that began in 2005. This year's collection features boldly colored polos, shorts and skirts that use performance fabrics made from recycled plastic bottles.

#PoloRalphLauren is proud to be the Official Outfitter of the **@USOpen**, which begins August 26th

Since 2005, we've had the honor of designing official uniforms for all on-court tournament staff

See the collection at <https://t.co/vg46pQnTIM#USOpen> pic.twitter.com/MMAauPBxiK

Ralph Lauren (@RalphLauren) **August 20, 2019**

Ralph Lauren is the official outfitter for the U.S. Open

Consumers can purchase apparel and accessories from the collection online or at the Ralph Lauren boutique at Louis Armstrong Stadium. Online, shoppers can also personalize their own polos and play a game collecting balls as a virtual ball person.

Online retailer Mr Porter has also curated an edit inspired by the U.S. Open. Pieces include polos, shorts and sneakers from brands such as Nike, Lacoste, Castore and an Adidas and Stella McCartney collaboration.

Timed with the beginning of the U.S. Open, German watchmaker Montblanc created a special-edition gift set with tennis great Novak Djokovic. Montblanc will support the Novak Djokovic Foundation with funds from the sales of the StarWalker special edition fineliner, which is limited to 300 pieces ([see story](#)).

Sports and luxury

Luxury brands from various sectors often use mainstream, large-scale sporting events to reach broad audiences. Many of these sports partnerships are ongoing.

Swiss watchmaker Rolex began a partnership with the USTA to become the official timekeeper of the U.S. Open.

Starting with the 2018 U.S. Open, Rolex-branded clocks will keep the time for the matches. A signature clock at the Arthur Ashe Stadium was overhauled into a new Rolex display as well as various timekeeping instruments throughout USTA Billie Jean King National Tennis Center ([see story](#)).

Each year, hundreds of millions of viewers watch the Super Bowl, making it appointment television in an era of fragmented audiences and an invaluable opportunity for brands.

This year, luxury fashion labels, hospitality companies and upscale beverage and automotive companies all participated during the Super Bowl festivities in some manner.

Mercedes-Benz returned to the airwaves during the game after sitting out Super Bowl LII. The automaker reportedly paid \$324 million for a decades-long naming rights agreement for Mercedes-Benz Stadium, the site of this year's matchup ([see story](#)).

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