

# Industry Insider: Greg Downey



**Title:** Senior Director, Brand and Consumer Marketing, NASCAR  
**Education:** JD, State University of New York, Buffalo  
BS, Business, Penn State University  
**Career:** Group Director, Entertainment Marketing, Coca-Cola  
Vice President, Brand Entertainment, NBC Universal

*This interview was conducted by Steve McKelvey, an associate professor and graduate program director in the Mark H. McCormack Department of Sport Management at the University of Massachusetts Amherst and vice president for industry relations for the Sport Marketing Association.*

In July 2012, Greg Downey was named senior director of brand and consumer marketing for NASCAR, bringing to the world's most popular racing circuit a reputation for deep consumer insights and best-in-class fan and customer relations gleaned from years at Coca-Cola.

Prior to joining NASCAR, Downey was group director of entertainment marketing at Coca-Cola, where he oversaw the company's North America entertainment marketing efforts including branded integrations, celebrity endorsements, and gaming strategies. He was also among the brand's leaders for asset activation, media negotiations, brand building, and advertising.

Downey, who graduated from Penn State University and earned his law degree from the State University of New York, has also served as vice president of branded entertainment at NBC Universal and director of entertainment properties at the United States Olympic Committee.

Last October, Downey served as one of the featured speakers at SMA's annual conference in Orlando, Florida. His presentation titled "Marketing Through Sports" provided many insights into the increasingly sophisticated marketing of the NASCAR brand. This interview sought to build and expound upon Downey's remarks at the conference.

**Q:** Let's start with your recent job change. Obviously, going from the corporate side of the industry to the sport properties side can pose its challenges. How would you describe these challenges, and secondly, what are some of the key learnings from your experience at Coca-Cola that have been most readily transferable to NASCAR?

**Downey:** It has been exciting to explore and learn about the great brand that is NASCAR. I've been able

to apply a lot of what I learned about brand building at Coca-Cola. There are many similarities between all great consumer-facing brands, particularly the need to maintain the core consumer while finding ways to grow, and NASCAR is a fantastic corporate culture in which to do this. We are very fortunate to be at a company that is led by the grandson of the founder.

**Q:** You spoke at SMA about the importance of attracting a more diverse fan base. Can you elaborate?

**Downey:** We have a very large and loyal fan base—roughly 30% of the U.S. population. Everyone involved with NASCAR, and particularly our sponsors, understands that to maintain the strength of those numbers moving forward, we need to attract younger, more diverse fans. Our seven platforms are focused on reaching youth, Gen Y (millennials), and multicultural audiences. Our challenge is in coming up with more innovative ways to attract these new audiences, particularly Hispanics. While we continue to refine our strategy development, the overall messaging and creative for NASCAR absolutely has to look multicultural. The creative tone and approach of our strategy have to appeal to the audiences we're trying to reach without alienating our avid fan base.

**Q:** It's been well documented through academic research studies as well as more practitioner-based studies that there are some built-in challenges that come with trying to appeal to the Hispanic market. I suspect you got firsthand experience with this during your tenure at Coca-Cola. Could you elaborate on what you see as the primary challenges in this regard for NASCAR and share some of the insights you already have in terms of how best to take the NASCAR product to the Hispanic market?

**Downey:** As I shared at the SMA Conference, our area of focus is going to be on building the next generation of fans. In particular, we will grow the sport's popularity with millennials and the Hispanic population. We'll be careful to recognize the distinctions between a more Mexican-influenced population on the West Coast and a more Cuban-influenced population in Florida. While our general market strategy will be multicultural, we'll look for specific spots of opportunity locally. We want to make sure our strategy is grounded in a thoughtful approach driven by sound consumer insights.

**Q: Can you expound more on your strategies for reaching multicultural audiences?**

**Downey:** What we're doing right now is working with our individual tracks in places like California, Miami, Phoenix, and Texas, because they have greater local marketing opportunities with the Hispanic population. It just makes sense to do more intensive programs in these markets. Our general advertising, which is broadcast-based, will speak to the Hispanic audience. NASCAR is a complex ecosystem, so our sponsors and broadcast partners do a lot of the marketing on our behalf. We recently completed a deal with FOX Deportes, which will provide the sport's most expansive Spanish-language broadcast offering ever, including coverage of 15 NASCAR Sprint Cup Series races, original programming, daily news segments, weekly updates, and the first-ever live Spanish-language broadcast of the Daytona 500. Whether it's FOX, ESPN, or Turner, or the Coca-Colas, Fords, and GMs of the world, there's a real opportunity to have mass impact. But it takes clear vision and direction and working with the right people.

Additionally, over the past year, NASCAR invested time and resources in securing key executives in-house who have expertise in multicultural brand marketing and integrated marketing communications to help the sport engage more fans.

**Q: What would you say is your biggest challenge in offsetting the decline of older fans? And how will you get today's younger generation as interested in auto racing as they are in playing video games?**

**Downey:** Many of our fans go to a race on a Thursday, camp, and socialize. It's one of the best tailgate experiences you can have, but it's a big-time commitment—and a physical one. How do we offset that? We're spending a lot of time improving our at-track experience with our track partners to make both our older and avid fans more comfortable. We're also doing a lot of work around cell phone service. When you get 150,000 people at a track, it's hard to get cell phone service, and it's hard to download. So there's a big tech infrastructure program in place to make it eas-

ier for people to use their mobile devices. Kids especially have to be constantly connected, and we recognize that.

As for reaching the younger generation, a lot of kids think auto racing is just cars going around in circles. They don't understand the strategy. They don't understand what occurs in the pit. The issue is that kids today have shorter attention spans. You've got to keep them constantly stimulated, and it becomes complicated if they can't understand the sport. What we need to do is reach out to kids on their terms—find out how they learn about sports. It's especially difficult in our case because you can't join a Little League NASCAR team. Research shows that our sport tends to have a lot of generational transfer. In other words, a youngster will fall in love with the sport after attending a race with a father, an uncle, or another male figure. You don't see that as much now. That's a societal issue we have to deal with. So one of our big strategies is to introduce the sport to kids through the media channels they consume—gaming, apps, etc. We also have to develop race camps and work with schools to pull together field trips to local race tracks. We will be doing a lot of different things.

**Q: Can you speak about the role of traditional media versus the role of digital media in continuing to build the NASCAR brand?**

**Downey:** In the past, we have been overly reliant on television, simply because Turner owned our digital rights. But now that we've re-acquired those rights, we are going to be much more aggressive in the digital world, while incorporating a vision that matches our industry's business objectives. Digital will now complement the TV viewing experience. We developed a completely new website that launched in January that will open up a new media channel for us. Our campaigns will have much greater fan engagement than a 30-second spot. There will be a lot more digital integration with our mainstream advertising.

We have also made a heavy investment in talent, training, and technology. In 2012, NASCAR became the first sports league in the world to introduce the Fan and Media Engagement Center (FMEC) in Charlotte, North Carolina. The FMEC is the first facility of its kind built, in conjunction with HP, to monitor and measure both traditional and social media. FMEC will help NASCAR better understand fan and media conversations in social platforms so that it can optimize engagement with the social community. The first-of-its-kind facility, which is also a first for HP, officially went online and was fully operational on January 14, 2013. NASCAR has a strong history of connecting with our fans and the engagement center is the next evolution. It's a testament to our commitment to be driven

to innovate. It was built exclusively for the unique model of our business in order to listen, engage, inform, and respond to all forms of key media. That includes print, television, radio, and, of course, digital and social media platforms.

In 2012, Google selected NASCAR for its wildly successful April Fools' Day joke that took the world by storm, with an overwhelming response from members of the media and fans alike, on various social media outlets. The announcement was that the popular search engine was partnering with NASCAR to launch a race team, Google Racing, which would bring autonomous (driverless) vehicle technology to NASCAR racecars. The tongue-in-cheek stunt grabbed global headlines and showcased a variety of NASCAR stars' personalities.

Also in 2012, NASCAR was the first sports league in the world to work with Twitter to provide fans with an original platform that enhanced the live-event experience and streamlined tweets from drivers, media members, and fans to provide fans with unparalleled access. NASCAR was also the focus of Twitter's first-ever ad campaign. Through this unique partnership, NASCAR fans were given an inside view of live race action as it unfolded through real-time interaction via #NASCAR on Twitter. NASCAR and Twitter were able to feature the best tweets and photos from NASCAR insiders in an effort to bring the behind-the-scenes story to life during NASCAR race weekends. The first-of-its-kind hashtag program was subsequently expanded, and similar programs were set up with the UEFA, the Olympics, and both the Republican National Committee and Democratic National Committee.

As result, NASCAR's Twitter footprint grew 151% (1/1/2012-1/7/2013), from nearly 340,000 to more than 850,000 followers. From March 1, 2012, through January 7, 2013, there have been over 2.5 million tweets by over 299,000 contributors that used #NASCAR in their tweets. According to a *SportsBusiness Daily/Journal* report, "#NASCAR" was the second-most popular sports-related trend on Twitter in 2012. Additionally, the NASCAR Facebook page has grown 35% since January 2012, from more than 2,400,000 "likes" to almost 3,250,000 likes. NASCAR in 2012 placed heavy emphasis on international outreach to expose the sport to new global audiences.

In 2013, NASCAR hosted a Google Hangout event at which the seven 2013 Driver for Diversity drivers were announced. Through NASCAR's relationship with the search engine, Google is providing the technology and platform that will enable NASCAR to send out a link where fans and media can watch the announcement on NASCAR's YouTube channel.

**Q: Greg, in your remarks at the SMA Conference, you noted that in part because of the economic conditions of 2008-2010 that hurt sports in terms of decreased sponsorship and decreased leisure spending, NASCAR conducted a very thorough and highly insightful situational analysis. You shared that the results were "bold and transformative." Could you share a few of the key insights gleaned from this study and how they are informing your strategies moving forward?**

**Downey:** First, NASCAR is unique in professional sports, because it is not a franchise system. It is a collection of independent entities that are dependent upon each other, so it is critical to align stakeholders. Second, NASCAR is also unique in that it is responsible for developing its athletes, unlike other major sports that have youth sport structures, the collegiate sport system, and professional minor leagues to do that. As stewards of our sport, NASCAR is focused on creating and implementing a healthy business model that works for its multiple stakeholders today and for decades to come.

Our Industry Action Plan (IAP) is a comprehensive plan informed by exhaustive research we commissioned; it is capital intensive, but it will also help transform how we do business. The IAP already is delivering substantive examples under each of its seven planks including:

Youth & Gen Y: Implementing a kids' marketing platform;

Multicultural: NASCAR races on FOX Deportes, including the Daytona 500 live;

Driver Star Power: Injecting NASCAR's stars into mainstream entertainment opportunities;

Digital & Social: Bringing our digital rights back in house;

Fan & Media Engagement Center

Product Relevance: Launching the Gen-6 car, modeled after production cars; and

Event Engagement: Infrastructure and fiber connectivity upgrades at a number of tracks.

**Q: With regard to your Industry Action Plan (IAP), could you elaborate on the Driver Star Power platform?**

**Downey:** With regard to Driver Star Power, we have undertaken a number of steps. First, we have created a team dedicated to building drivers' brands. Second, we have created a centralized process for driver marketing initiatives to create efficiency and to expand reach and focus on the sport. Third, we have shifted from a one-size-fits-all drive promotion to an individualized approach for current and future. Last but not least, we are investing resources in driver development deeper

into our ranks, beyond just Sprint Cup drivers, to sustain long-term growth.

**Q: You spoke about near-term priorities, including the desire to positively influence Madison Avenue decision makers, as well as the development and implementation of a NASCAR Marketing Calendar for 2013 that integrates all of the various new initiatives and partners in a very comprehensive way. Can you discuss this calendar in more detail?**

**Downey:** The calendar provides NASCAR internally and our various partners with a year-long roadmap. It entails first identifying key pillars that cover the entire length of our season and are designed to mobilize our core fans, provide partners with activation platforms to utilize to drive their business while helping us to grow the sport. Each of these strategies align with core tactics, key dates, and media windows. This calendar approach represents the first time that NASCAR has taken such a comprehensive approach to marketing the sport.