

THE BRANDS THAT WON THE WORLD CUP

Without Kicking a Ball

A C1 Business English reading lesson exploring the hidden commercial drama behind the 2026 FIFA World Cup — and what every business leader can learn from the brands that turned restrictions into opportunity.

C1
BUSINESS ENGLISH
Advanced Reading Lesson



READ

authentic business article



VOCABULARY

10 key C1 business phrases



PRACTISE

comprehension & gap-fill



DISCUSS

real business insights

ABOUT THIS LESSON

The 2026 FIFA World Cup generated \$9 billion in revenue and 6 billion content engagements worldwide. Behind the football drama, a very different battle was playing out — one involving sticky tape, white sheets, and billions of dollars in brand exclusivity.

This lesson uses that story to develop sophisticated business English vocabulary and critical thinking at C1 level.

Ideal for business leaders, managers and entrepreneurs who want to discuss marketing, sponsorship and corporate strategy in English at the highest level.

BY THE END OF THIS LESSON, YOU WILL BE ABLE TO:

- ✓ Use 10 sophisticated C1 business idioms and phrasal verbs
- ✓ Discuss marketing strategy and brand management
- ✓ Analyse the commercial side of major sporting events
- ✓ Evaluate sponsorship decisions and brand values
- ✓ Express and justify opinions on corporate power and consumer culture

A) WARM UP — DISCUSS BEFORE YOU READ

Which sports do you enjoy the most — as a player or a spectator?

What is the biggest and most popular sport in your country?

Have you ever visited a major sporting event? Did you enjoy it?

Many World Cup tickets sold for over \$1,000. How much do you think a ticket to a football match should cost?

The Brands That Won the World Cup Without Kicking a Ball

The football World Cup in the USA, Canada and Mexico is now **in full swing**, and the drama has not disappointed. Some of the big teams have really **hit the ground running** by winning their opening games, while others have been **slow off the mark**, failing to **measure up** to their usual high standards.

But behind all the on-pitch drama, there is another story playing out inside the stadiums. Around each venue there is a physical barrier, and when you step inside you enter a completely different world run by FIFA — a world full of confusing names and sticky tape.

Football in 2026 is a hugely **lucrative** business. The World Cup alone is set to generate around \$9 billion in revenue, with 6 billion content "engagements" expected worldwide. Sponsorship is, therefore, enormously big business, and the official sponsors who hold contracts with FIFA are taking the event very seriously indeed.

As soon as you enter any World Cup stadium, all commercial material not from official sponsors is strictly forbidden. Organisers have **gone to great — and highly amusing — lengths** to remove unofficial branding from scoreboards, seats, uniforms and clocks. In San Francisco, you may have to guess what sauce you are putting on your hotdog, as all brand names on sauce bottles have been taped over, as if they contain government secrets.



The clampdown extends to the players themselves. Germany's Jamal Musiala was seen wearing headphones before kick-off with the manufacturer's logo carefully covered with black tape. It is part of what FIFA calls its "Venue Dressing Programme" — and it comes at significant cost. Chris Canetti, president of the Houston 2026 World Cup Host Committee, told Sports Business Journal that his committee alone budgeted more than \$1 million to meet FIFA's debranding guidelines.

All US stadiums have had to change their names for the tournament, and even Google Maps has had **to toe the line** so that fans do not end up in the wrong place. The iconic SoFi Stadium in Inglewood is now the "Los Angeles Stadium." MetLife Stadium, which will host the tournament final, has become the "New York New Jersey Stadium." And Seattle's Lumen Field has been rechristened simply as "Seattle Stadium" for the duration of the event.

KEY PHRASES

- in full swing
- hit the ground running
- slow off the mark
- measure up
- lucrative
- go to great lengths
- toe the line
- take it on the chin
- put up with
- get away with

BY THE NUMBERS

\$9bn

Total World Cup 2026 revenue

\$1.8bn

FIFA marketing revenue

6bn

Expected content engagements

\$1m+

Houston's debranding budget alone

65,878

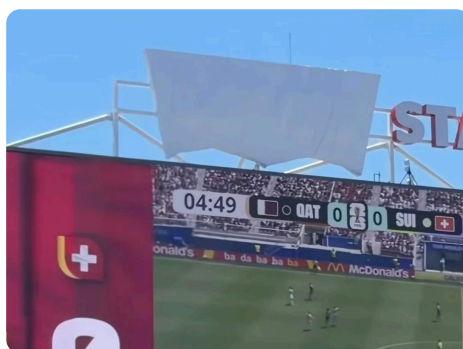
Seats taped over at Gillette Stadium



Some unfortunate FIFA employees had to tape over the name "Gillette" on all 65,878 seats at the stadium normally known as Gillette Stadium in Boston, and the huge Gillette sign was unceremoniously covered with a big white sheet. Refusing **to take it on the chin**, Gillette edited a photo of the

covered sign to make the white sheet look like shaving cream — a joke so obvious, and so perfectly on-brand, that it needed no caption.

Levi's went one step further, covering up its own logo on Instagram. The caption? "Welcoming the world to the beautiful [redacted] stadium!" The brand pointed out what everyone could already see: a white sheet cut in the exact shape of the Levi's batwing is, technically, still a Levi's batwing. Levi's even drove a mobile billboard reading "NOTHING TO SEE HERE" around the stadium, with the hashtag #DefinitelyNotLevis.



Not every brand had **to put up with** the ugly white sheet. Despite not paying a penny in sponsorship, Mercedes-Benz was able **to get away with** keeping its giant symbol on the roof of the Atlanta stadium — because each of the sign's eight panels weighs 500 tonnes, making it a rather more permanent fixture than FIFA had bargained for.

It isn't just the unofficial partners having fun. Australian deodorant brand Rexona — known as Sure in the UK and Degree in the US — have positioned their logo directly under the armpits of all match officials. The logo remains hidden throughout most of the action, but appears clearly on camera every time a referee raises his arm to indicate a substitution or additional time. The company clearly has faith that after chasing Kylian Mbappé around the pitch for 90 minutes, the referee will still have dry armpits.



"FIFA's debranding policy protects commercial exclusivity worth \$1.8 billion — but some brands have found brilliantly creative ways around it."

— The Independent, June 2026

ALL 16 STADIUM RENAMES

OFFICIAL NAME	WORLD CUP NAME
MetLife Stadium (NJ)	→ New York New Jersey Stadium
SoFi Stadium (CA)	→ Los Angeles Stadium
Gillette Stadium (MA)	→ Boston Stadium
AT&T Stadium (TX)	→ Dallas Stadium
Hard Rock Stadium (FL)	→ Miami Stadium
Levi's Stadium (CA)	→ San Francisco Bay Area Stadium
Lumen Field (WA)	→ Seattle Stadium
Mercedes-Benz Stadium (GA)	→ Atlanta Stadium
Arrowhead Stadium (MO)	→ Kansas City Stadium
Lincoln Financial Field (PA)	→ Philadelphia Stadium
Allegiant Stadium (NV)	→ Las Vegas Stadium
NRG Stadium (TX)	→ Houston Stadium
Estadio Azteca (Mexico)	→ Mexico City Stadium
Estadio BBVA (Mexico)	→ Monterrey Stadium
Estadio Akron (Mexico)	→ Guadalajara Stadium
BC Place (Canada)	→ Vancouver Stadium

KEY WORDS & PHRASES

in full swing

to hit the ground running

slow off the mark

to measure up

lucrative

to go to great lengths

to toe the line

to take it on the chin

to put up with

to get away with

C KEY WORDS FROM CONTEXT

Match each phrase to its definition, then complete the two example sentences. You may need to change the verb form.

- At its most active stage; fully underway: _____
 a) The new hire has really _____ since she joined the team last month.
 b) By the time I arrived at the office, the meeting was already _____.
- To start with great energy and no slow build-up: _____
 a) The new manager has really _____ since she joined the team.
 b) The merger talks were already _____ by the time the press got hold of the story.
- Slow to react or respond when speed was needed: _____
 a) Critics argued that the government had been _____ in responding to the housing crisis.
 b) We were a bit _____ to respond to the client's email, and they weren't happy about it.
- To meet a required standard or expectation: _____
 a) The new supplier just doesn't _____ to the standards we expect from our partners.
 b) After a strong marketing campaign, the product simply failed to _____ once it launched.
- Generating a large amount of money; very profitable: _____
 a) The consultant left his salaried role to pursue a more _____ career as a freelancer.
 b) The company signed a very _____ new contract with a client in Germany.
- To try very hard, putting in a lot of effort: _____
 a) The whole team _____ to ensure the presentation was ready on time.
 b) She _____ to avoid any conflict with her business partners throughout the negotiations.
- To follow rules or comply with what authority expects: _____
 a) New employees are expected to _____ during their probationary period.
 b) The new director made it very clear that everyone would be expected to _____ from now on.
- To accept disappointment or bad news without complaining: _____
 a) When the big project was cancelled, the team simply _____ and moved on quickly.
 b) Rather than complaining, the brand _____ and turned the situation to its advantage.
- To tolerate something unpleasant without complaining: _____
 a) Nobody wants to _____ a colleague who is consistently late to every meeting.
 b) Not all brands were willing to _____ the restrictions imposed by the tournament organisers.
- To do something wrong or against the rules without being caught or punished: _____
 a) He _____ missing the deadline this time, but it certainly won't happen again.
 b) Mercedes-Benz managed to _____ keeping its logo because the sign was simply too heavy to remove.

D COMPREHENSION

Answer the following questions in your own words, using full sentences.

1. What is FIFA's debranding policy, and why does it exist?

2. Why did Google Maps change the names of stadiums during the tournament?

3. How did Gillette and Levi's each turn FIFA's debranding requirements to their advantage?

4. The article implies that Rexona's marketing at the tournament is particularly brave. Why?

E KEY WORDS IN A NEW CONTEXT

Read the monologue below. A club director is speaking to colleagues about a sponsorship mistake. Fill in the gaps using the words and phrases from the box. You may need to change the form of some verbs.

lucrative

slow off the mark

measure up

take it on the chin

get away with

toe the line

hit the ground running

put up with

A Big Sponsorship Mistake

"Thank you all for coming. As you know, it has been a difficult few months for this club. Signing with a fast food company seemed like a (1) _____ deal at the time — the money was good and we moved quickly. But we were (2) _____ when it came to doing our research, and the reaction from our fans was immediate and very negative. We had promised our supporters a club that stands for health, performance and community. A fast food brand simply didn't (3) _____ to those values, and the press made sure everyone knew about it. We have (4) _____, we have apologised publicly, and now we are moving forward. But I want to be very clear — we cannot (5) _____ making the same mistake again. So from today, things are going to be different. Any new partner will be expected to (6) _____ with every part of our values agreement. Our team has already (7) _____ on this — we have spoken to over twenty companies in the past two weeks. We are not prepared to (8) _____ another reputational crisis."

F — DISCUSSION

FIFA earns an estimated \$1.8 billion in marketing revenue from the 2026 World Cup. Do you think its debranding policy is justified, or does it go too far?

Levi's and Gillette both turned a negative situation into a successful marketing opportunity. Can you think of other examples where a brand has benefited from a restriction or setback?

From a sports club's perspective, what types of sponsors would be considered appropriate, and what criteria would you use to evaluate a potential partnership?

What are the risks of choosing the wrong sponsor, and how difficult is it for a club to walk away from a lucrative deal that conflicts with its values?

Rexona has positioned its logo under the armpits of match officials. What do you think of this as a marketing strategy? What are the risks?