

MARKETING AT 39,000 METRES: HOW RED BULL TURNED EXTREME RISK INTO COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

the branding machine behind an energy drink

How a drink nobody asked for became a global sports, media and events empire — by inventing a category, buying entire teams instead of sponsoring them, and building a self-reinforcing engine that turns risk into brand equity.

C1
BUSINESS
English
Reading



READ

authentic business article



VOCABULARY

12 key C1 business phrases



PRACTISE

comprehension & gap-fill



DISCUSS

real business insights



ABOUT THIS LESSON

This lesson explores how Red Bull built one of the world's most recognisable brands without ever competing on taste — inventing the energy drink category, buying sports teams outright, launching its own media house, and staging headline events like Red Bull Stratos.



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

- ✓ Use 12 new business phrases and collocations confidently
- ✓ Discuss how companies build brand identity through risk and content
- ✓ Evaluate the pros and cons of a bold marketing investment

WARM UP — DISCUSS BEFORE YOU READ

Have you ever tasted Red Bull, and what is your opinion on energy drinks?

Why do you think that Red Bull is so well-known worldwide?

Can you think of any other brands that are famous for extreme sports or bold marketing stunts?

Would you personally ever try an extreme sport, such as skydiving or wingsuit flying? Why or why not?

Marketing at 39,000 Metres: How Red Bull Turned Extreme Risk into Competitive Advantage

What is the first thing that comes to mind when you think of Red Bull? Is it the sickly sweet taste of the drink, or is it something far more extreme like jumping from the edge of space, racing a Formula 1 car, diving off a cliff, or plummeting down a mountain?

What began in the 1980s as an overpriced, medicinal-tasting drink evolved into a global branding, sports and media empire without ever focusing on flavour or health claims.

Just how did Red Bull become so synonymous with risk, ambition and pushing limits?

PUSHING THE LIMITS STAGE 1 – IF NO CATEGORY EXISTS FOR YOUR PRODUCT, WHY NOT INVENT ONE!

Before 1987, there was no such thing as an ‘energy drink’ in Western markets, so rather than competing with established soft drinks like Coca-Cola, Red Bull **carved out a niche** all for itself. By offering free samples at universities and nightclubs, targeting night-shift workers and extreme athletes, Red Bull started to **sow the seeds** for a whole new category of drink. Whether you were working all night, training for a marathon, or chasing a startup dream, Red Bull soon became the **first port of call** for those needing to push limits. It then built momentum by sponsoring underground sports and making “energy” central to its identity. It was now time to **set its sights on** the sporting elites...

PUSHING THE LIMITS STAGE 2 – INSTEAD OF SPONSORING TEAMS, OWN THEM INSTEAD!

Red Bull then **embedded** its brand into elite competition by buying sports teams, even expanding into more extreme sports in order to **feed into** the brand image. The company founded Red Bull Racing in order to **gain a foothold** in Formula 1, later **consolidating** its influence by adding another team – AlphaTauri. In football, it bought FC Red Bull Salzburg, RB Leipzig and the New York Red Bulls. By owning teams, facilities and branding environments, Red Bull embeds branding into the club’s core identity, and turns competitive sport into a sustained brand platform rather than a temporary advertising slot. It was then time to build a platform for consumers to watch these teams in action...

BUSINESS TERMS IN THE ARTICLE

Category creation

Building an entirely new type of product rather than competing inside an existing market.

Brand platform

A sustained structure — a team, event or channel — used to build brand identity over time, rather than a one-off advert.

Media House

An in-house division that produces and distributes its own content, instead of buying advertising space.

KEY PHRASES

to carve out a niche

to sow the seeds

first port of call

to set one's sights on

embedded

to feed into

KEY NUMBERS

1987

Year Red Bull launched and invented the ‘energy drink’ category

5

Professional sports teams owned outright across F1 and football

2007

Year Red Bull Media House was founded

PUSHING THE LIMITS STAGE 3 – INSTEAD OF JUST ADVERTISING, BUILD YOUR OWN MEDIA EMPIRE!

Red Bull Media House was founded in 2007, producing content such as action sports, music and adventure on YouTube and streaming platforms. Instead of interrupting audiences with ads, it attracts them by creating content that consumers actively seek out and share. When you control the narrative infrastructure, marketing becomes a long-term asset rather than a recurring expense. Now for **the icing on the cake...**

PUSHING THE LIMITS STAGE 4 – INSTEAD OF SPONSORING EVENTS, CREATE YOUR OWN INSTEAD!

Red Bull creates its own extreme headline-grabbing events designed for maximum cultural impact. The most dramatic has been Red Bull Stratos, where a pro skydiver jumped from 39 kilometres above Earth. The event was live-streamed globally. From a business perspective, this was not merely a stunt; it was strategic brand storytelling at scale.



The now-retired Red Bull Air Race brought high-speed planes to global cities; Red Bull Rampage showcases extreme mountain biking, and other events include Red Bull Cliff Diving and the Red Bull BC One breakdancing contest.

Red Bull has even **dipped its toes into** numerous music, esports and cultural festivals. The brand does not wait for media moments — it manufactures them. Content draws attention; attention drives sales; sales finance further teams, events and media production. Through calculated risk management, bold positioning and long-term brand investment, Red Bull has engineered a branding machine that feeds itself. Its famous slogan, “Red Bull gives you wings,” reinforces this value proposition, communicating benefit rather than flavour, selling transformation, not refreshment – an iconic brand **synonymous** with energy, risk-taking and ambition.

“Red Bull gives you wings.”

— Red Bull’s global brand slogan

MORE KEY PHRASES

to consolidate

the icing on the cake

to dip one’s toes into

synonymous

to plummet

KEY WORDS & PHRASES

first port of call

the icing on the cake

to carve out a niche

to consolidate

to set one's sights on

to plummet

synonymous

to sow the seeds

to gain a foothold

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1 BASED ON THE CONTEXT OF THE ARTICLE

Can you match the words in the box to the definitions listed below? Then add the word into the example sentence. You may need to change the form of the word to fit the meaning of the sentence.

1. To fall or drop very quickly and steeply: _____
 | "House prices have been _____ in the capital this year."
2. So closely associated with something that the two things are seen as the same: _____
 | "In the 1990s, the brand became _____ with luxury and exclusivity."
3. To create a distinct and successful position in a market or area: _____
 | "The company has _____ in the premium skincare market."
4. To start a process that will slowly grow or develop over time: _____
 | "The founder _____ of the business during his time at university."
5. The first place someone goes to for help, advice or a service: _____
 | "When the app crashes, the IT helpdesk is always our _____."
6. To decide to focus effort or ambition on a particular goal or target: _____
 | "After dominating Europe, the company _____ the American market."
7. Deeply fixed or established within something so it becomes part of it: _____
 | "The principle of transparency is deeply _____ in the company's culture."
8. To contribute to or strengthen something, especially an image or idea: _____
 | "The success of the campaign _____ the brand's reputation for innovation."
9. To establish a first, often small, position in a new area or market: _____
 | "The startup used social media to _____ in an industry dominated by giants."
10. Strengthening or securing a position that has already been established: _____
 | "The merger was a key step in _____ their dominance in the sector."
11. The best or most exciting part of something, added at the end: _____
 | "Winning the industry award was _____ after a record-breaking year."
12. To try something new for the first time, usually cautiously: _____
 | "The fashion brand has _____ the food and beverage market."

2 D) COMPREHENSION

Can you answer the questions below about the text?

1. What strategy did Red Bull use before 1987 to build its brand, and how was this different from what other drinks companies were doing at the time?

2. According to the article, why did Red Bull decide to buy sports teams rather than simply sponsor them?

3. True or False: Red Bull Media House was set up primarily to run advertisements for Red Bull products. Explain your answer.

4. What made Red Bull Stratos significant from both a sporting and a business perspective?

5. Based on the whole article, how does Red Bull's approach to marketing create a 'self-reinforcing' cycle? Use examples from the article to support your answer.

3 E) KEY WORDS IN A NEW CONTEXT

Below you can find a paragraph. Can you fill in the gaps in the paragraph with the words from the box below? You may need to change the form of some of the verbs in the box so that they fit correctly into the paragraph.

to consolidate

to gain a foothold

to carve out a niche

embedded

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first port of call

the icing on the cake

synonymous

to plummet

Brand Strategy

When a new business enters a crowded market, its early sales can feel like they are (1) _____ before the brand has had time to establish itself. The challenge is to (2) _____ of long-term loyalty early rather than chasing short-term profits. One of the most effective ways to do this is to (3) _____ rather than competing head-on with larger, better-funded rivals. Once a company begins to (4) _____ in its target market, the focus often shifts to (5) _____ that position. A strong brand becomes (6) _____ in the customer's daily life — it becomes the (7) _____ whenever someone needs that product or service. At this point, the brand has become (8) _____ with quality in the customer's mind. And when a new campaign then exceeds all expectations, that is truly (9) _____.

THE SCENARIO

Red Bull's marketing team is considering a bold new headline event on the scale of Red Bull Stratos, designed to launch a new product line and generate global attention. Before it is greenlit, the leadership team wants a clear-eyed look at the numbers involved.

\$30–50m

estimated production & safety cost of a flagship stunt event

8m+

expected live global stream viewers on launch day

18 mths

typical lead time for planning & safety certification

3–5 yrs

typical payback period through brand value & media reach

In groups of three or four, take on one of the roles below. Using these figures — and today's key phrases — discuss the benefits and risks of the project from your character's point of view, then work together to reach a group decision.

THE AMBITIOUS BRAND DIRECTOR

- Believes bold, headline-grabbing stunts are exactly how Red Bull carved out a niche and became synonymous with risk-taking in the first place.
- Points to Red Bull Stratos as proof that a single event can feed into the brand for years afterwards.
- Argues that waiting too long lets competitors gain a foothold in this kind of content-led marketing first.

THE CAUTIOUS CFO

- With costs of up to \$50 million and 18 months of lead time, this is a slow, expensive, high-risk bet.
- Warns that a single safety incident could cause sponsorship value to plummet overnight.
- Asks whether the returns can really be attributed to the event, or whether they are just short-term hype.

THE HEAD OF MEDIA HOUSE

- Wants the event to be the first port of call for content across owned channels for months afterwards, not just a one-off stunt.
- Pushes to consolidate footage, interviews and behind-the-scenes material into a long-running content series.
- Suggests the real icing on the cake would be a docuseries that keeps the story alive long after the event.

THE RISK & SAFETY OFFICER

- Insists that safety protocols must be deeply embedded in every stage of planning, not added at the last minute.
- Wants the team to sow the seeds of a proper risk framework before any budget is approved.
- Warns against rushing to set its sights on a launch date before certification is fully complete.

Group task: Once everyone has made their case, decide together — does Red Bull go ahead with the event? Be ready to present your decision and reasoning to the rest of the class.

USEFUL PHRASES

GIVING YOUR OPINION

"The way I see it, this could really set us apart from the competition."

"From my perspective, the risk here outweighs the reward."

AGREEING

"I agree to some extent, but we'd need to gain a foothold quickly to justify the cost."

"Yes, I believe that would really feed into our long-term brand image."

DISAGREEING

"I take your point, but I'm afraid I can't really go along with you there."

"Unfortunately, I don't think we can afford for this to flop."

PERSUADING

"This is exactly the kind of project worth ploughing real investment into."

"If we don't act now, a competitor will set their sights on this first."

REACHING A DECISION

"Let's weigh this up properly before we commit."

"On balance, I'd say the opportunity outweighs the risk."