



**Award Designation and Category:**

Entertainment & Sports

**Campaign Title:**

We Love It Here

**Year the campaign took place:**

**Brand:** ESPN

**Creative Agency:**

**Media Company/Agency:** McKinney

**Research Company:** Starcom

**Additional Affiliated Companies:** Audience Theory

**Summary of the marketing challenge, methodology, insight discovered, creative execution and business impact.**

In 2014, the ESPN SEC Network became the most successful cable network launch in television history. Since launch, the network has experienced steady growth year over year. As of 2019, the SEC Network was the #1 watched college sports network on TV.

So where could we improve? Research showed two clear challenges to overcome:

- Our viewers saw us less as a destination for SEC-related programming, and more as a conduit for live-sports.
- Fans lacked awareness of the breadth and depth of the SEC Network offerings, despite being viewed as a relevant and differentiated brand within the ESPN portfolio.

After embarking on extensive brand research including secondary, cultural and qualitative phases, it was clear that fans had a passion for more than just live sports. The network had the opportunity to own a deeper, emotional connection by reinforcing, celebrating and inspiring the SEC lifestyle. Evolving the network to a home for SEC fandom—a place fans can see it, feel it, live it (wherever they are)! The layers of research revealed the brand positioning and new North Star: **SEC Network brings fans home to everything they love about the SEC lifestyle.**

With these learnings, we took this opportunity to lock arms with fans and take a step closer to everything we all love about the SEC, and wrote a big, ongoing love letter to everything that makes the Southeastern Conference feel like “home.” And we certainly brought SEC fans home as it delivered one of the best month’s ratings-wise since the network’s launch, in addition to driving growth in social engagement and overwhelmingly positive brand love across social media.

### **Consumer Insight**

To grow SEC Network, we must bring fans home to everything they love about the SEC lifestyle.

## Marketing Challenge

Despite the SEC Network's success, there was still room to grow our audience. Our research uncovered a challenge. The majority of our viewers were primarily using the SEC Network for a functional benefit: accessing programming only to watch their teams play live.

The opportunity? Our research also showed that the **SEC Network had an opportunity to grow greater emotional connection with the brand** by reminding fans of everything we have to offer, beyond just live sports. Fans express the greatest excitement for an SEC Network experience that reinforces the brand's values for live games AND connection to COMMUNITY, PERSPECTIVE and LIFESTYLE. Its pageantry & pride, warmth & hospitality, traditions & rituals.

We had an opportunity to remind fans that the SEC Network exists to serve the most passionate fan base in the country; **all who call the Southeastern Conference "home." We want fans to See It, Feel It, Live It.**

The one essential truth and core challenge that we heard from fans across the board, is that they mostly engage with the Network for functional purposes. It's about access to watching their team play live. However, what was ultimately revealed was that there were 2 dominant fan need states:

- **"Give Me The Game"** They are tuning in for live games, game day coverage, in-access and deep analysis/perspective
- **"Give Me More"** These fans also have the same qualities as above, but they also have a natural gravitation towards non-game content that reinforces a sense of connection. The Network plays a functional AND emotional role in their lives

The Give Me More fans were our biggest opportunity for growth and connection.

However, regardless of need states, ALL fans connect to the *SEC Lifestyle*—the traditions, rituals that SEC fans share. They come to life in music, community, family, food, fashion, celebratory spirit and passion. All of these elements ladder-up to create our core cultural connection points—which only the SEC and SEC Network can own.

## Methodology

Over six months, we embarked on an extensive brand audit and positioning strategy work to drive the SEC Network forward. The research program consisted of secondary, cultural and qualitative research, including national in-depth interviews and focus groups among sports fans. Findings and insights, taking the form of consensus-building workshops, were shared at pivotal moments throughout the project to align key internal and external stakeholders across the business. Three key phases that led to the Network's new positioning included Brand Immersion, Cultural and Academic, and Consumer Insights.

Our **Brand Immersion phase** set the groundwork, with in-depth stakeholder interviews. We interviewed senior cross-functional partners across ESPN, core senior members of the Southeastern Conference office, as well as Athletic Directors from SEC Member-Institutions, in an effort to understand the entire business and brand ecosystem. A semiotic and content based audit decoded the signature styles, approaches, and emotional and functional benefits that the SEC Network experience and its competitive set offered across touchpoints. All stakeholders agreed that this Networks belongs "to all of us." It's this feeling of ownership and emotion that drives the internal connection to the brand.

Additionally, we immersed ourselves within the brand through careful audit of all previous SEC Network research and insights, and a competitive overview that provided a full picture of the college Network landscape.

The **Cultural and Academic phase** took a macro-views of sports culture overall, and included interviews with sports and culture academic experts, and intensive secondary research into the culture and trends of Southern lifestyle, regional sports fandom, and demographic and cultural shifts.

Finally, the **Consumer Insights Phase** was our marquee learning segment to talk to SEC fans across the country. This deep dive into the SEC viewer base was conducted over a one month period—including 10 National in-depth phone interviews, as well as 8 focus groups, in 4 markets (3 within the SEC geographic footprint, and 1 out of footprint). Overall, fans certainly feel that similar sense of ownership as internal stakeholders, which comes from a deep-rooted pride in the fact that there is no conference like the SEC; it's

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dominant, elite, exceptional and meaningful. That passion often translates to the SEC connection meaning more than other conference—fandom is a fundamental part of their identity.

At the end of all of our research, the biggest brand opportunity was for SEC Network to anchor the brand around the idea of being the home to the SEC Lifestyle. It conveys the warmth and hospitality of the South, provides 24/7 SEC access like no other, it creates deep connection to fans, and it celebrates the traditions and rituals that make us who we are.

## **Creative Execution**

As the only network dedicated to the SEC lifestyle, we decided to write a big, ongoing love letter to everything that makes the Southeastern Conference feel like “home.”

Our big idea was simple: **The SEC Network. “We Love It Here.”**

The message encapsulated how our fans feel about the SEC. And re-asserted ESPN’s commitment to all things SEC, beyond just broadcasting live games.

“We Love It Here” acknowledged – and celebrated – that the SEC does things that other fans in other places don’t. It showed that being a fan of the SEC means being driven by passion and love. Love for the game, love for teams, love for the places that SEC fans call home. And that even when logic and sense go out the window, when you love something, you “get it.” It’s home to you.

We launched the campaign with our most captive audiences when the greatest number of eyes were on the conference: Rivalry Week and the SEC Championship game. And ignited a 3-pronged groundswell:

1. **Anthem TV** spot pays tribute to and captures the essence of the SEC Lifestyle and everything that makes the Southeastern Conference feel like home. The football centric story celebrates the rituals, traditions, and passions which drive and differentiate SEC fandom. It featured the Grammy nominated track "All Your'n" by Tyler Childers. It aired on ESPN, within key SEC matchups and during high-profile events with SEC relevance across ESPN Networks from our Rivalry Week/Thanksgiving launch, to Bowl Season, through the College

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## 2020

Football Playoff, as well as Member-Institution owned Media assets  
<https://vimeo.com/375911903/8a1806286e>

2. **Unique member-institution spots**, we developed specific :15 spots for each school, honing-in on unique traditions and rituals held dearly to those fans, but that can be appreciated across all SEC fan bases that share the common values. It fuels not only pride of their institution, but in the conference as well. We launched with a coordinated launch across social media; leveraged on-channel promo inventory, in-content time within SEC matchups across ESPN Networks, and Member-Institution owned Media assets. All 14 schools-  
<https://vimeo.com/showcase/6607703> password: sec
3. **Atlanta "takeover"** was an opportunity to connect with fans during the week of the SEC Championship—a perfect environment to secure key placements around Atlanta, with contextually and culturally relevant messaging, unique to the two teams in the Champ game (LSU and Georgia), to remind them why SEC Network was home to everything they love about SEC. With high-impact digital OOH, mobile-billboards, in-stadium messaging, College Football Hall of Fame presence, social media activation, and geofilters (Instagram & Snapchat) <https://wdrv.it/5b6227f56>

### **Business Results/Lessons Learned**

Our campaign launched the weekend of Thanksgiving 2019, and has been one of our most successful efforts across our College Networks.

**Driving Awareness:** Familiarity for the SEC Network overall grew +4 percentage points after campaign launch vs. March 2019. For college sports fans, this was the largest uptick among all ESPN networks during this timeframe.

**Ratings Growth:** We had one of the best year ends rating wise, during the time that we heavy-upped on our campaign spots. We grew 37.4% from December 2018 (Source: comScore TV Essentials).

**Social Media Lifts:** On social, our launch anthem generated a 9% uptick in volume of social mentions along with increasing engaged users by 10%.

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Sentiment towards the campaign has been one of our most positive across the entire ESPN portfolio with nearly 100% net sentiment as the creative and music strongly resonated with fans.

**Off-Platform Media:** We leveraged OOH advertising to drive awareness during the launch of “We Love it Here” at the SEC’s marquee event, the SEC Championship game, resulting in 3.7MM impressions.

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