



Award Designation and Category:

GOLD Food & Beverage

GOLD Best Consumer Experience Award

Campaign Title: Courtside

Year the campaign took place: 2021



Brand: Michelob ULTRA

Creative Agency: FCB NYC

Media Company/Agency: FCB NYC

Research Company:

Additional Affiliated Companies:

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

Play games without the fans? Nah, it's impossible. I ain't playing."

–LeBron James | March 6, 2020

When COVID-19 sent the 2020 season — and beer sales — into a tailspin, Michelob ULTRA knew that, without fans, the games would feel as empty as the stands themselves.



While other leagues scrambled to install cardboard fan cutouts, Michelob ULTRA set out to grow its cultural relevance with a younger, more urban drinker. The brand partnered with Microsoft and the NBA, and Michelob ULTRA Courtside was born. Powered by Microsoft's AI-driven Together Mode,

the experience digitally immersed fans in the NBA Bubble... from the safety of home.

Suddenly, the live-watching experience was redefined, as players interacted with the brand's fans during the games. The experience generated press and social conversation all season, as fans found themselves "sitting" next to celebrities and NBA legends.

Michelob ULTRA's sales grew 32%, due to on-bottle, scan-to-win ticket promotions and soaring cultural relevance. Millions of hours of NBA coverage across 124 games and 13 billion impressions made Courtside the #1 sports industry topic. And the power of game-changing innovation... changed the game for years to come.

Consumer Insight

Fans bring joy to sports; without fans, NBA athletes worried the game would feel as empty as the stands. themselves.



Marketing Challenge

Overall beer sales by volume have been steadily declining since 2013, driven by a decrease in alcohol consumption and new category exploration.¹ In 2019 alone, beer consumption shrunk by -2.3%, with domestic beer faring worse at a decline of -3.6%.² Sales by dollar have relied heavily on on-premise popularity (at a price premium), but COVID-19's disruption to on-premise and large social gathering consumption sent the category plummeting.¹

Within the declining category, light beer is particularly challenged, declining 3%–4% per year.¹ Once favored for its combination of low calories, low carbs and refreshment, the segment is being challenged by the growth of hard seltzers, like White Claw and Truly. In 2019 alone, hard seltzer volume increased by nearly 50%, and it is expected to triple by 2023.²

While Michelob ULTRA's health-and-wellness-oriented positioning is on trend culturally, the brand continues to be seen as a "diet" and "watery" beer by consumers. As a result, the brand significantly under paces its market share in social conversation and badge value, remaining a beer people are pleased, but not proud, to drink.³

To grow its share, Michelob ULTRA would need to claim its place in popular culture and social conversation, particularly among young and urban drinkers, who are quickly abandoning the category for hard seltzer.

Sales growth is heavily influenced by mental availability (reach, consideration, and share of voice) scores, which are driven by exposure and cultural relevance of brands.

This meant Michelob ULTRA's mission was clear: Matter in culture.⁴



Methodology

Michelob ULTRA set out to recruit a younger demographic of drinkers who enjoy an active lifestyle and consume better-for-you alcoholic beverages (e.g., light beer and hard seltzer). Gaining consideration and relevance with a younger demographic is particularly important for Michelob ULTRA, as it significantly under-indexes the beer category with Men & women aged 21–35.⁵ This demographic is difficult to capture, as beer is an acquired taste, and hard seltzer, which is easy to drink and boasts enviable health facts, dominates culture.

We conducted secondary research to find a culturally relevant moment for this younger audience. We found that nearly two-thirds of Americans ages 18–44 are avid or casual fans of the NBA.⁶ To meet this younger audience, Michelob ULTRA became the NBA’s official beer sponsor.

COVID-19 sent the sports season into a tailspin. As lockdowns set in, on-premises sales evaporated, sports sponsors divested, and fans feared a “lost season.”⁷ Other leagues scrambled to install cardboard fan cutouts in the stands. Athletes and coaches threatened not to play.

Professional athletes have long attributed success at their craft not only to dedication, but also to those in the crowd cheering them on.⁸ Widely known as “Social Facilitation,” research shows that athletes benefit from the Yerkes-Dodson law, which states that “the mere presence of other people will enhance the performance in speed and accuracy of well-practiced tasks.”⁹

Michelob ULTRA had a chance to bring joy back to the game and its consumers’ lives along the way. “It’s Only Worth It If You Enjoy It” was already Michelob ULTRA’s motto, but the pandemic made it an imperative. Michelob ULTRA knew that tapping into the social-behavioral connection between athletes and fans could bring joy back to the game, change culture, and save the season.



Creative Execution

Michelob ULTRA virtually transported fans right back where they wanted to be... and where players needed them to be: Courtside. In partnership with the NBA and Microsoft, Michelob ULTRA Courtside reinvented the 124 games of the NBA season for the pandemic era. These brands unleashed groundbreaking innovation in the NBA Bubble to create an interactive, immersive experience for fans and players alike.

Calls-to-action across touchpoints directed fans to scan their Michelob ULTRA bottle for a chance to win a ticket to a coveted Courtside "seat." The debut of Microsoft's new, AI-driven Together Mode and a ring of 17-foot LEDs then digitally immersed fans in the stands of the NBA Bubble from the comfort and safety of their own homes. Real-time sensory technology, including millisecond data transfers, a never-before-seen rail cam, and 120 spatial audio contact microphones made the player-to-fan interactions and reactions even more energizing.

As the season went on, cultural moments were engineered into every game. The Courtside "stands" were themed to become the newsworthy backdrop of the season. Depending on the night, seats were filled with first responders, adoptable dogs, or unsuspecting fans who found themselves rubbing digital elbows with the likes of Lil Wayne, Shaq, and even President Obama. Headlines wrote themselves; influencers were impossible to miss as they sat in the stands, and much-needed shareable images of joy spread during the pandemic.

An integrated campaign supported the action throughout the season, driving sustained cultural relevance, exposure, and earned attention that beat all expectations.

- **Earned Media (PR/Influencer):** Courtside dominated headlines in sports (ESPN SportsCenter etc.), lifestyle (People, Today, etc.), and news (Wired, Fast Company, etc.). Influencers (Scottie Pippen, Peyton Manning, etc.) posted and celebrities made appearances.¹⁰
- **Digital:** All channels highlighted and linked fans to an on-bottle, scan-to-win Courtside ticket promotion. The digital Courtside property quickly became the most visited URL in the brand's history and increased the brand's CRM database significantly.



- **Social Conversation:** Michelob ULTRA became the #1 most talked-about brand, aside from NBA properties, during the NBA season.¹¹
- **Paid Media & Added Value:** Incremental impressions, driven by higher viewership and engaging creative executions, delivered beyond budgeted goals across broadcast integrations, TVCs, and digital. Added value flowed in, as Michelob ULTRA's Courtside fans were inextricably linked to the season, even making their way into top video game NBA 2K20.

Player-to-fan Courtside interactions were center stage in 81.5 million hours of NBA coverage, creating culture nightly. And the power of game-changing innovation... changed the game for years to come.



Business Results/Lessons Learned

Michelob ULTRA Courtside took the beer from an accepted commodity to a brand that was in demand and at the center of bringing joy back to quarantine culture.

Sales grew 32%, due to on-bottle, scan-to-win ticket promotions, soaring cultural relevance, and unprecedented brand exposure.¹² Michelob ULTRA's sales were more than double the volume share growth of its closest competitor during the NBA season.⁹

In a year when distribution (physical availability) of Michelob ULTRA remained flat, it was the biggest share-gainer among beers in the industry⁹. Michelob ULTRA gained +69 points of market share, more than any competitor - whilst its biggest competitors saw declines.⁹

The campaign's success was driven by more than millions of hours of NBA coverage and 13 billion campaign impressions, making Michelob ULTRA Courtside the #1 topic in the sports industry.^{13,14}

That level of exposure and cultural relevance drove a substantial lift in all major mental availability metrics, including consideration, reach, and share of voice. Brand consideration had the highest consideration increase of all tracked beers.¹²

Michelob ULTRA's first-to-market experience transformed passive live viewers into participatory virtual fans, raising the bar on virtual experiences and setting a new cultural norm. The Courtside digital property became the most visited in the brand's history, substantially increasing the brand's CRM database.¹¹

The real-time, emotional, and participatory nature of the engagement between players, fans, and broadcasters inspired industries well beyond sports. And today, Microsoft is applying insights from Courtside to other projects with the goal of making remote presences in the workplace, classroom, and culture more fun, engaging, and memorable.¹⁵