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The Countdown to World Cup Public Diplomacy Begins ^[1]

With the Winter Games underway in Milan and some 5 billion viewers watching the Olympics this month, diplomats and corporate leaders alike still have time to plan their next major engagement on the global sports stage: the 2026 World Cup in North America.

These moments of global connection through sport provide rare opportunities for countries and companies to build their brands, reach new audiences, and forge new relationships in an increasingly dynamic era of geopolitics. In short, no government or business can afford to miss out on the outreach opportunities provided by such marquee sports moments.

In the massive American market – poised to host the Olympics in 2028 as well – competition for attention is a sport in itself and media markets are highly segmented. Foreign governments and businesses find that connecting with an audience is as challenging as it is important. Very few moments have the power to cut through and reach these diverse audiences at once. The World Cup does.

In 2010, during the first African-hosted World Cup, the U.S. Embassy in South Africa jumped on the chance to leverage this spotlight for maximum advantage. Using U.S. team outreach events, VIP visitors, new social media platforms, and branded products, the embassy tied the American narrative to the groundswell of African World Cup pride and enthusiasm resulting in lasting positive impact.

During the first Trump Administration, the European Union held some 200 events across the United States, connecting everywhere from Congress to state Capitols, chambers of commerce to universities. Germany created its Wunderbar Together series in 2018-2019, hosting over 1,500 events with 300 partners across the U.S, demonstrating the strong appetite for transatlantic exchange.

The markets that proved most engaging were not always those with a wealth of consulates. Places like Kansas City and Seattle (hosting games for this year's World Cup) rolled out red carpets that led to deeper engagements and longer-term relationships. By planning diplomatic activities around the World Cup now, diplomats and corporate affairs leaders can also establish outreach templates to replicate across North America when the Olympics return to America in 2028.

Start with Who

When engaging in North America, countries should start with the connections they already have: their diaspora communities. Given over 50 million Americans were born abroad (roughly 15 percent of the U.S. population), nearly every nation on the globe has a built-in connection point to leverage. Well-organized social and educational clubs have been a mainstay of American society since the nation's founding 250 years ago, providing a ready connection

platform for foreign governments. During the World Cup, these diaspora communities should be tapped as valuable channels to build connections and amplify messages with local media, schools, and politicians. An athlete's family connection to small town America will generate positive interest and leave a lasting mark of good will.

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Commercial brands offer arguably an even more powerful platform for connection. For example, Norway's Jarlsberg cheese is the most popular imported cheese in America. Brand recognition is extraordinarily high, yet the cheese's nationality recognition is quite low. (A lot of American consumers think it is Swiss, because it has similar holes.) Oslo has an opportunity during this year's World Cup to combine nation branding efforts, the popularity of this dairy product, and America's love for a great snack to build the Norway national brand in the minds of Americans.

Build a Plan and Repeat It

This year's first three-country-hosted World Cup is also the first with 48 national teams, expanded from 32, and the first to feature 104 games, up from 64. This all combines to create more opportunity and more brand competition.

Official and honorary consuls with local knowledge should be working now to organize events, leveraging American professionals to guide them in strategic markets. By engaging student interns and others to help build and host events, countries can compound their engagement investments to help tell national stories and directly connect with sports fans young and old.

The smartest ambassadors we have advised think strategically beyond the D.C. Beltway. Denmark this year began a 50-state campaign highlighting local U.S. state connections to Denmark. Estonia leaned on its technology leadership to show up at the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas. The savvy ambassador knows the cache of their title and the impact they can have in small-town America to create catchy social media clips.

To really go big online, diplomats ought to consider partnership opportunities with leading European influencers popular in America, from travel and fashion content creators like Éros Brousson of France or Nikkie de Jager of the Netherlands to the Swedish-Italian couple Felix and Marzia Kjellberg. One post from one of these global icons comes with millions of American followers.

These social media channels did not even exist last time the U.S. hosted the World Cup in 1996. Building a public diplomacy strategy now that smartly capitalizes on these attention-grabbing spectacles using the latest media trends can reap big impact at minimal cost. Just as U.S. Olympic broadcaster NBC connects with Americans using high-emotion personal athlete stories and celebrities the likes of Snoop Dogg, so should European governments think outside the old-school diplomatic box to enhance their relationships with the U.S. public.

Don't settle for an ad during the game, or a billboard on the pitch. Think about how you can build deeper, lasting relationships with communities and leaders who matter. A mayor today could be a key congressional chairman tomorrow. A budding business relationship this year could lay the groundwork for large-scale trade next year. But none of this diplomatic success can happen if diplomats spend too much time watching these games from the sidelines and stands. Now is the time to be off the bench, building bridges with creativity and going big to strengthen the transatlantic relationship.
