

Microsoft angles for exposure with NFL partnerships

January 20 2014, by Janet I. Tu

Of course the Seattle Seahawks' winning season is great for the Seahawks brand. But it's also been a boon to another big hometown name: Microsoft Corp.

The globe-spanning software behemoth obviously is a brand already known to the vast majority of football fans.

But two of its newer consumer products might not be as familiar: Surface, Microsoft's first branded tablet, launched last year, that has a minuscule market share against the iPad and other tablets; and the Bing search engine, which is slowly gaining search share but still lags far behind market-dominating Google.

Hence, partnerships such as Bing's sponsorship of Seahawks training camp, and a multiyear deal, announced last year, that makes Surface the official tablet of the NFL. (That same deal also made Microsoft's new Xbox One the NFL's official game console.)

The NFL deal "puts Surface front and center in front of one of the biggest, most rabid audiences in the world," said Brian Seitz, senior marketing manager for Surface.

Evidence of the partnerships has been apparent all season and during the NFL playoffs.

During training, Seahawks players wore practice jerseys displaying the

Bing logo.

Bing representatives have held "Bing It On" challenges before games, including at Touchdown City, the interactive activities center at CenturyLink Field Event Center in Seattle.

The challenge asks passers-by to test whether they prefer Bing or Google for their searches.

At Sunday's NFC Conference Championship game, fans will receive 12th Man towels emblazoned with the Seahawks logo - along with the Bing logo and "BingHawks" Twitter hashtag set up by the Bing team for Seahawks fans.

Karin Muskopf, senior public-relations manager for Bing, declined to say whether any of these efforts have increased Bing usage.

But fans, she said, "love seeing the social-media stuff."

Along with the BingHawks hashtag, the Bing team has created an "I'm In" website where fans from around the world can express their support of the Seahawks.

The Seahawks Radio Network is now branded as the Bing Radio Network, with games and pre- and post-game shows broadcast locally.

"We really view ourselves as not only a partner to the Hawks but to Seahawks fans as well," Muskopf said. "What we see we do is bring fans closer to the Hawks."

Microsoft's Xbox has been the Seahawks' official gaming and entertainment console for about 10 years, with a partnership that includes in-stadium displays of the Xbox brand and player appearances

at Xbox events.

The Xbox and Surface partnership with the NFL that began last year means there's a prominent display of the Surface brand behind players' benches at games.

There also are NFL applications, such as ones for fantasy football and game replays, created for the Surface and other Windows tablets.

Several NFL teams, including the Seahawks, have deployed Surfaces in their business offices and are testing tablet apps designed to help manage players' health.

"With Surface, we wanted to take it to a national stage where we could show people all the great things it could do," said marketing manager Seitz.

In addition, it was important to Microsoft that the sponsorship include more than just a logo on a stadium.

"There's tangible work being done" by the teams using Surface, Seitz said. "We want people to know that Surface is sponsoring but also that teams are actually using it because there's value there."

As with the Surface deal, the Xbox partnership with the NFL involves displaying the brand name, but also deeper product integration.

"This season with Xbox One, we wanted to make Sundays interactive," said Ryan Luckin, senior PR manager for Xbox.

There's an NFL on Xbox One app that includes the ability to get scores and stats on the entire league in real time and to get highlights from various games - and to have those displayed in a smaller window on the

same screen and at the same time that a viewer is watching a live game, movie or TV show.

Similarly, users of the app could keep track of their fantasy football teams with real-time updates on a smaller window of their large-screen TV, as they watched a live game.

More recently, the app added a feature called Playoff Face Off in which participants predict performances for the big games, giving them a chance to win tickets to this year's and next year's Super Bowl.

And before the launch of the Xbox One last November, the Xbox team set up giant SUVs outside game stadiums where fans could try out the consoles.

With these partnerships, instead of highlighting the company as a whole, Microsoft chose to feature products and services that consumers could readily identify, buy and use.

Seitz and the other Microsoft managers declined to say how much money the company spends for these partnerships and sponsorships. News reports have pegged the five-year NFL deal at \$400 million.

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