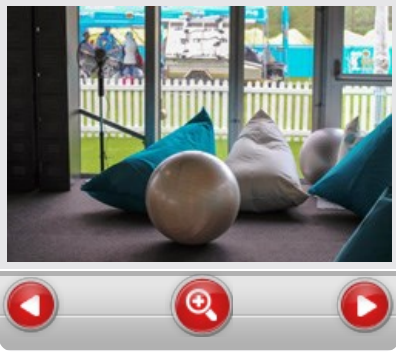


Port in a storm

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What do two Bedouin tents, 16 pairs of gum-boots, 60 beanbags and 50 Pilates balls have in common? They were all part of a state-of-the-art corporate hospitality project at the recent FNB Wines2Whales mountain biking race - a case study in just how high the bar has been raised in customer cossetting at premier sporting events.



FNB Wines2Whales MTB consisted of three bike races over 1-10 November. Some 3,300 riders set off in the Somerset West winelands and traversed 13 wineries, 26 private farms, six mountains, historic roads, mountain passes and nature conservation areas before finishing in Hermanus, the home of whale-watching.

"There are rare opportunities for corporate marketers to reach out to high net worth individuals, in a beautiful and unusual setting," said Scan Display chairman Alex Hawes, whose company was tasked with implementing the huge, upmarket rider relaxation area. "And when these opportunities do become available, the host company needs to be seen to be supportive, co-operative and understanding of the participants."

Generally in sporting events, sponsors' marketing activation has focused on the VIPs - private and corporate clients. In top end mountain biking, however, every single participant is a member of the sponsors' target market.

Over 70% of the riders are senior executives or entrepreneurs who own their own businesses. They can afford an expensive bike and the entry fee, apart from other costs. They are driven and passionate individuals who can take time off to pursue their interests. The key is developing an offering that is appropriate for clients who are used to a high standard of personalised service.

The brief was to develop a sanctuary for all participants: an area where they could not only recharge from their gruelling exertions, but also power up social media devices and have access to up-to-date news and facilities, said Hawes.

The setting was the Oak Valley sports field in Elgin, surrounded by beautiful old trees. The main marquee, tented accommodation, race briefings, awards and entertainment were all situated here. This was where the first stage finished, the second stage started and finished, and the third stage start.

Project manager and designer Brainwave Communications based the concept of the relaxation area on a chilled locker-room - but with an upmarket feel that extended to art works on the walls and calming greenery.

There was, however, only a three week window from concept to opening day; and Brainwave is based in Johannesburg, but had to ensure a flawless execution on a rural site based an hour's drive from Cape Town. Scan Display was accordingly selected for its national footprint and track record.

The relaxation area extended over 300m², comprising a central glass-sided marquee surrounded by a white picket fence. Flanking each end of the marquee was a massive Bedouin tent. Portable modular units provided shady areas on the perimeter. The whole area (surrounded by the riders' tents) was dimly lit at night (with eco-conscious LED lighting) to provide a gentle, welcoming glow.

"There is a lot that can potentially go wrong with a project this size," said Hawes. Fast construction was crucial, given rainy weather and muddy surroundings. (Hence 16 pairs of gumboots bought for the team from a local shop by Scan account

executive John Reinders).

Furnishings in the corporate turquoise and white colours included 60 beanbags - 50 of standard size, and 10 huge enough to seat three people each - as well as 16 outdoor chairs, 16 indoor chairs, eight benches, three couches and much more. A wooden pallet theme was used for the vertical wall units, inspired by the rural fruit-growing and packing surroundings and the pallets used to protect the beach track.

"The client really understood experiential marketing at this high level," said Hawes. "They understood the project, the brief, the solution. And they kept their cool. It was a great team effort. The challenge now is how to use this platform and expand on it next year."

The carpeting from the project will be donated to schools and crèches in the area and units developed for the project will be stored for re-use in 2014.

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