

MOVE

5 REASONS RUNNING BRANDS GET IT WRONG

And what to do instead





INTRODUCTION

RUNNING IS A CULTURE

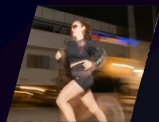
Not a demographic, not a media channel, not a seasonal activation moment. **A culture.**



THAT DISTINCTION MATTERS MORE THAN IT SOUNDS.

The rules for engaging with a culture are completely different from the rules for reaching an audience. Audiences receive messages. Cultures resist them. Audiences can be bought. Cultures have to be earned.

Running is also booming.



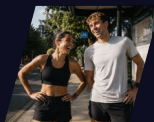
8M

Regular runners in the UK.



1.3M

People applied for a place on the London Marathon start line in 2027.



3x

Running clubs on Strava more than tripled in a year.



GEN Z

Are reshaping the event landscape in real time as they swap the nightclub for the run club.

There has never been a better moment to build a brand in running. I know, I know: I would say that. But the numbers don't lie.

And yet most brands are getting it wrong. Not catastrophically wrong. Not embarrassingly wrong. But wrong in the specific, fixable way that means they're spending money without building anything that lasts.

They're buying awareness without earning trust.

“

I've spent 20 years working with brands in sport and physical activity. But mostly in running culture. I keep noticing the same patterns. Brands who get it, and brands who really don't. The ones who do aren't necessarily spending more. They're not necessarily bigger. They are just thinking differently about what it means to be in running.

This guide is about the five mistakes I see most often, and what to do instead.





REASON 01

THE ACTIVATION PROBLEM



MOST RUNNING SPONSORSHIPS FAIL BEFORE THEY START.



They fail because the brand treats the rights fee as the investment when it's actually the entry cost.

Here's how it plays out: The deal gets agreed. The logo goes on the feather flag. The MD signs off the press release. And then that's considered job done. The brand has 'entered running.'

What they've actually done is pay to be present in an environment they haven't engaged with. They're in the room, but they're not in the conversation. *Awkward.*

A report from Les Binet and Will Davis (via the IPA) makes this explicit:

"budget accounts for 89% of the variation in profit. ROI accounts for just 11%."

I'm not saying it's all about the size of your budget. But you can't scrimp and save your way to a return on a partnership you haven't properly activated.

The running industry is full of brands holding rights they're not activating. They've paid for the stage and left the lights off.

The brands that actually build equity in running understand that the rights fee is the beginning, not the end. The investment is what you do with it: the content, the community, the meaningful presence in runners' lives before, during, and after race day.

Buying the association is the entry cost. Using it is the investment.



WHAT TO DO INSTEAD

Recognise that acquiring the rights is only half the job.

Before signing any rights deal, figure out your activation budget. And then tell your FD you need to double it. Honestly, get really specific really early and commit to how you will bring the partnership to life. You don't need to obsess over a Big Idea. But you do need a plan and the budget to deliver it.





REASON 02

THE IDENTITY GAP



MOST RUNNERS ARE NOT THINKING ABOUT PERFORMANCE.

Brands keep talking to runners about performance. Most runners are not thinking about performance. They're thinking about the run.

Here's the thing nobody ever says out loud:

Most runners are not trying to get faster. They're trying to feel something: the headspace, the hour to themselves, the community, the quiet satisfaction of finishing.

Those are not the same objective, and they require completely different brand responses.

The whole industry talks to runners in the wrong language. The brands selling into it (shoes, nutrition, recovery, apparel) mostly speak the language of performance: pace, splits, heart rate zones, recovery score. The implicit message in almost all of it is: running is something you do to optimise yourself.

That's not why most people run. **They run because it's the one hour of the day when no one needs anything from them.** Because their running group is the best community they know. Because finishing a race (any race, at any pace) is a proof point about who they are, not a data point about how fast they are.

Gen Z aren't chasing PBs the way previous generations did. They want experiences, communities, and stories to be part of.

The vast majority of the marketing budget chases a small minority of runners.

It's a commercial opportunity most brands are walking straight past.



WHAT TO DO INSTEAD

Stop asking 'how do we reach runners?' and start asking 'what does running mean to the people we want to reach?'

The first question leads to a media plan. The second leads to brand equity. They are very different destinations, and the second one is where the real opportunity is.





REASON 03

DO ONE THING WELL



MOST BRANDS DO THE SAME THING

Most brands, when they hit a difficult period, do the same thing: they broaden. More products. More channels. More audiences. More occasions. The logic feels sound: if this isn't working, let's try something else.

Brooks Running did the opposite. And it **nearly finished them**.

In 2001, Brooks was in trouble. They'd spent decades trying to be a footwear brand across multiple sports: baseball, football, aerobics, whatever the category du jour was. The result was a brand that stood for very little and was staring down the barrel of bankruptcy. New CEO Jim Weber arrived and made a decision that looked, at the time, like an act of desperation: exit everything except running. Completely. No lifestyle play. No mass market. No Walmart. Performance running only, sold through specialty run retailers, to people who took it seriously.

Turns out it was a **spectacularly good idea**.



Brooks became the number one running shoe at specialty retailers across the US. Warren Buffett bought them through Berkshire Hathaway and called them 'the best-run company I've ever seen.' Revenue grew from around \$50 million to over \$1 billion. The Ghost became one of the bestselling running shoes in the world. And they did all of it without chasing the lifestyle dollar, without a celebrity campaign, without trying to compete with Nike on Nike's terms.

They won by deciding what they weren't, as much as what they were.





PARKRUN TOOK THE SAME APPROACH FROM A COMPLETELY DIFFERENT STARTING POINT.

One thing only: free, timed, 5km, every Saturday morning. The discipline to define it clearly, resist the pull to expand it, and let it compound over time created one of the most powerful brands in sport and physical activity, without ever really thinking of itself as a brand at all.

You don't need a global budget to build a defensible position in running. You need to know exactly what you are, and be willing to say no to everything that isn't that.



WHAT TO DO INSTEAD

Define your specific runner with uncomfortable precision.

Then build everything from that definition. And when the temptation to broaden hits (it will), ask yourself whether Brooks would do it. The answer is almost certainly no.





REASON 04

THE LONG GAME



THE BEST BRAND PARTNERSHIP IN RUNNING IS 13 YEARS OLD.



Most brand managers have never heard of it.

Montane and the Spine Race. A British outdoor brand built around testing gear in the harshest conditions imaginable: polar expeditions, mountain rescue, environments that expose every weakness in a product. And an event that started in January 2012 with 15 people on a start line and 3 finishers.

Yep. Precisely three people finished the first Spine Race.

But the fit was so obvious it was almost embarrassing. The Spine wasn't about sponsorship or marketing. It was everything: a live testing programme, proof of concept, product feedback, R&D, and the stage for genuinely legendary storytelling in an environment that was the most natural expression of what the brand stood for. They didn't chase the biggest numbers. They committed to the right thing.





Five race formats later. A summer version. An Arctic edition. A jacket named after the race. Over a million people tracking it live.

Montane's name is permanently woven into the identity of Britain's most brutal endurance event. Because they were there at the start, and they stayed.

For every Montane, there are dozens of brands that signed three-year deals, put a logo on a finish line, didn't activate, and walked away with a folder of race-day photography and nothing else. The rights cost them money. The lack of commitment cost them the return.

Find the right fit. Reject the vanity numbers. Commit long enough to co-create something neither of you could have built alone.



WHAT TO DO INSTEAD

Ask a different question.

'Which event gives us the best reach right now?' is the wrong starting point. Start instead with: 'which partnership, built over time, could become something we'd both be proud of in ten years?' Different question. Very different returns.





REASON 05

THE LANDSCAPE HAS CHANGED →

SCALE FORMAT CLIMATE

THREE STRUCTURAL SHIFTS ARE ALREADY UNDERWAY.

None of them are speculative.

The running industry most brands are planning their investment around is not the one they'll be operating in within three years. And if the last decade taught us anything, it's that the brands who plan for where the market is going (not where it was) are the ones who end up looking clever.





01. SCALE

The London Marathon is expanding to 100,000 runners across a two-day event from 2027. Organisers call it a one-off. It won't be. Once you've demonstrated £400m of economic impact, raised £150m for charity, and given places to 50,000 people who've been waiting years, you don't close that door. 1.3 million applied in 2026. The demand exists. The infrastructure will follow.



02. FORMAT

Running is growing, and it's growing in more directions at once than at any point in history. Ultra distances, trail, social running clubs, women-only events, run commuting, running as mental health: all of it is growing simultaneously, and each strand is bringing in a different kind of runner with different motivations and different ideas about what brands belong in their world. Running is no longer one market. It's many. Brands still building their entire strategy around big-city pop-ups are engaging with one thin slice of a much bigger, more interesting picture.



03. CLIMATE

Climate Central's research puts 86% of global races (including all of the Abbott World Marathon Majors) on a list of events facing substantially worse conditions by 2045. Race directors are already responding: earlier start times, redesigned courses, rewritten welfare protocols. In 2026 the LA Marathon allowed runners to exit at mile 18 and still collect a finisher medal. This isn't a future scenario. It's already reshaping which events thrive, which formats adapt, and which partnerships age well. A brand that's committed its entire running strategy to one major event in a warming world is taking on more risk than its brief probably acknowledges.

But there's an opportunity here too, for brands willing to see it.

Events facing these pressures don't just need sponsors, they need partners who can help respond to the challenges. And runners preparing for increasingly difficult conditions need brands that actually understand what those conditions demand: the training adaptations, the preparation, the kit that performs in heat rather than just looks good on a photoshoot. The ones that do will earn something that a logo on a finish line can never buy.



WHAT TO DO INSTEAD

Plan for the landscape as it will be, not as it was.

Which events and communities will still be thriving in a hotter, higher-demand, more fragmented market? Build relationships there now. And ask whether your brand could be part of the solution to the climate challenge in running, not just a smart spectator of it.



CONCLUSION

If I had to reduce all of this to one thing, it would be this: running is a culture, not a demographic.

The brands that win in running treat it like a culture. They earn belonging. They find a specific runner and build everything around that relationship. They understand that runners aren't thinking about performance, they're thinking about literally everything else. They commit to the long game. And they plan for where the market is going, not where it was.

None of this is complicated. But it does require something most brands find surprisingly difficult: genuine curiosity about what running means to the people who do it.

Not focus groups. Not a sentiment report. Actual curiosity.

That curiosity, and what to do with it commercially, is why MOVE exists.

MOVE works with brands that are serious about running, from a single campaign to full creative partnership. Strategy, partnerships and creative direction, rooted in genuine understanding of the culture and the communities inside it.





ABOUT *RUSS JEFFERYS*

Russ is the **founder of MOVE Sports Marketing**, a specialist consultancy connecting brands to running culture.

Before founding MOVE, he spent ten years at parkrun, first as Head of Communications, then CEO, overseeing its growth into one of the most recognised free community events in the world, reaching 400,000+ weekly participants across 22 countries.





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