

The FreeWheel Viewer Experience Lab Presents

Delivering Ads Without Disrupting the Game

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VIEWER
EXPERIENCE
LAB

About the FreeWheel Viewer Experience Lab

The FreeWheel Viewer Experience Lab is designed to help media companies improve the quality, quantity, and relevance of TV advertising through quantifiable research, solutions, and technology. To learn more, visit freewheel.com/viewer-experience-lab.

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Introduction

Live sports offer advertisers something increasingly rare: Large, highly engaged audiences sharing the same moment. But reaching those audiences should not come at the expense of the experience that brought them together.

For viewers, the game, the stream, and the advertising are not separate; they are one continuous experience. Technical disruptions can make ads feel more intrusive while greater variety of advertisers and thoughtful ad formats can keep viewers connected to the action. Additionally, advertising that reflects the context of the game can feel like a more natural part of the event.

This latest research from the FreeWheel Viewer Experience Lab identifies advertising approaches that help create the best sports viewing experiences. This report explores how publishers, advertisers, and technology partners can **protect the game, keep viewers connected, and make advertising fit the moment**.

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Ad delivery in live sports is uniquely hard

Seamless delivery at massive scale

Large audiences may be watching simultaneously, with different ads delivered to individual viewers. That scale can lead to buffering, failed ad calls, and inconsistent video quality.

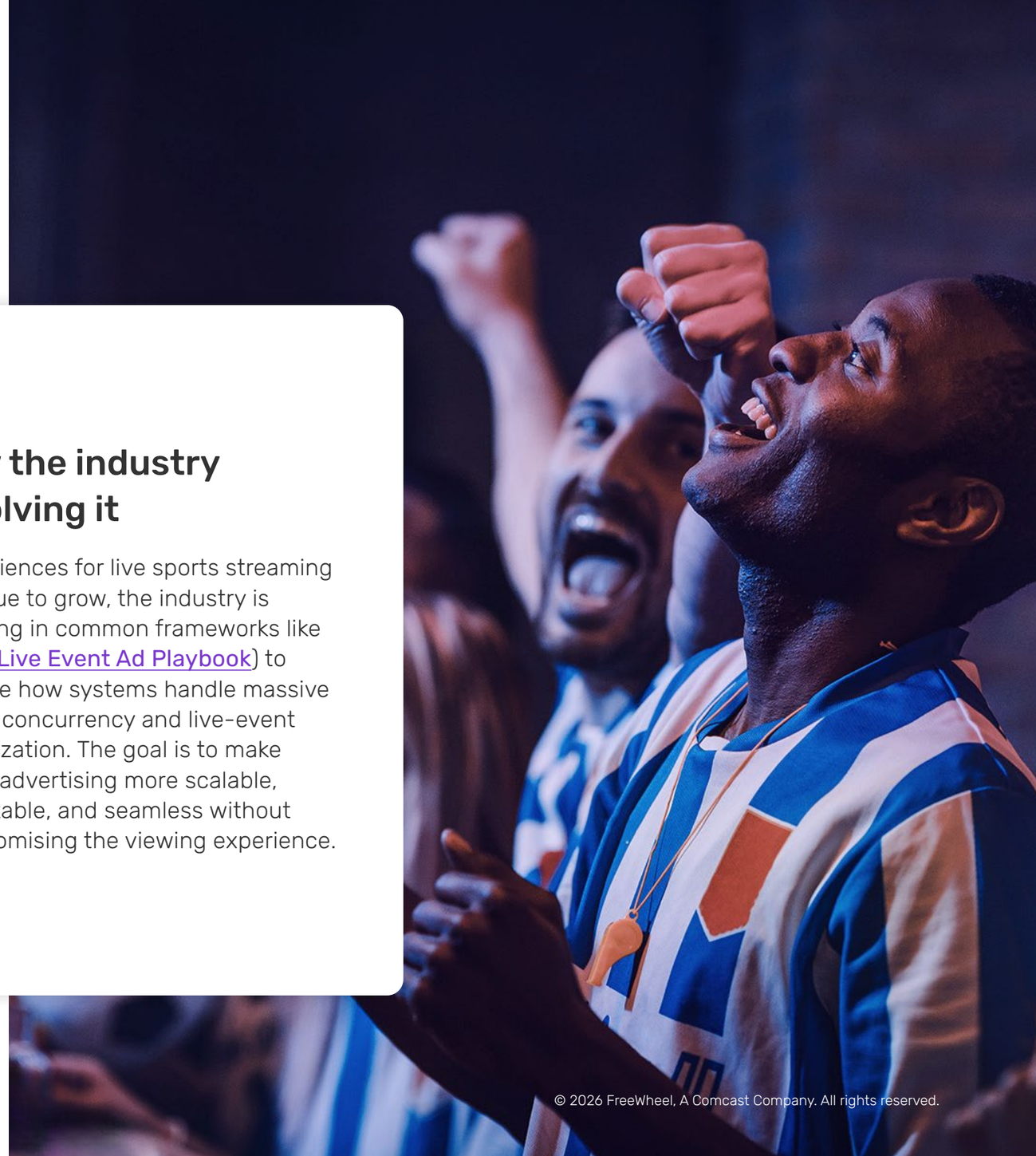
Precise timing in unpredictable games

Ad breaks must align with live action that can change in seconds. Poor timing can create dead air, black screens, or missed moments.

When these challenges become visible, an ad delivery issue becomes a viewing issue.

How the industry is solving it

As audiences for live sports streaming continue to grow, the industry is investing in common frameworks like LEAP (Live Event Ad Playbook) to improve how systems handle massive viewer concurrency and live-event monetization. The goal is to make sports advertising more scalable, predictable, and seamless without compromising the viewing experience.



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Study design

This research combined an in-lab experiment with a large-scale viewer survey.

In June 2026, 282 viewers participated in a controlled viewing session conducted with MediaScience. Participants watched 45 minutes of MLB, NBA, or WNBA content. Physiological measures and a post-viewing survey were used to assess responses to different ad delivery and creative experiences. In August 2026, FreeWheel commissioned a supplemental Dynata survey of 8,750 sports viewers to understand broader expectations for advertising during live sports.

The intent with both surveys was twofold:

Analyze impact of low ad delivery quality

- **Uninterrupted stream:** Ads played without a visible delivery issue.
- **Transition artifacts:** Abrupt cuts or frame stutters occurred around the ad break.
- **Latency:** Loading symbols or delays appeared during the ad break.
- **Slate:** A “we’ll be right back” screen appeared instead of an ad.

Analyze impact of contextually relevant ads

Within those viewing environments, viewers were also exposed to:

- **Contextual ads:** Creative from a brand connected to the game or sports moment.
- **Standard ads:** Creative from the same brand with no connection to the game or sports moment.

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For sports viewers, both the stream and ad experience can disrupt the game

Viewers' biggest frustrations span the entire experience, from buffering and video glitches to repetitive or excessive advertising.

Top 5 things that bother viewers when streaming[1]



Slowness, buffering, or delays (83%) — 1



Poor video quality or glitches (82%) — 2



Seeing the same ad too many times (77%) — 3



Too many ads in general (71%) — 4



Abrupt cuts or choppy transitions around ad breaks (68%) — 5

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PROTECT THE GAME

Smooth delivery helps ads feel less disruptive

Even when the ad itself does not change, a smoother viewing experience can make the ad feel less disruptive.

13%

Ads were rated 13% less intrusive when played with an uninterrupted stream[1]

3X

3X more viewers rated ads intrusive when technical issues disrupted the stream[1]



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PROTECT THE GAME

Seamless delivery helps ads earn positive attention

7-8% more viewers fixated on the ads when there were no interruptions compared to when there were slates or transition artifacts present.[1]

Not only did fewer people spend time fixated on the ads, **technical issues triggered negative audience response**.

Increase in negative emotions expressed as compared to a seamless stream:[1]

+97%

more negative response when transition artifacts present

+170%

more negative response when slates present

+84%

more negative response when latency present

Differences are statistically significant, $p < 0.05$.



Fixation defined as a period when the eyes remain focused on a specific location for at least 100 milliseconds (0.1 seconds), indicating visual attention.
Negative emotions (e.g., sadness, anger, disgust, fear) measured via facial coding.

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KEEP VIEWERS CONNECTED

Fans favor formats that keep the game viewable

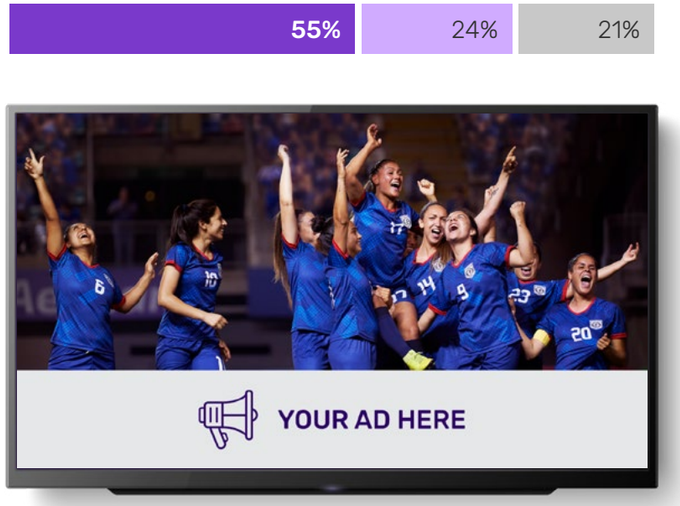
62% of viewers say the priority for live sports ads is simple: Don't miss the action, and get back to the game fast.[2]

In-game formats can complement traditional breaks by creating opportunities that allow viewers to continue following the action. Across all three in-game formats we tested, more viewers said the format works well than said it does not.

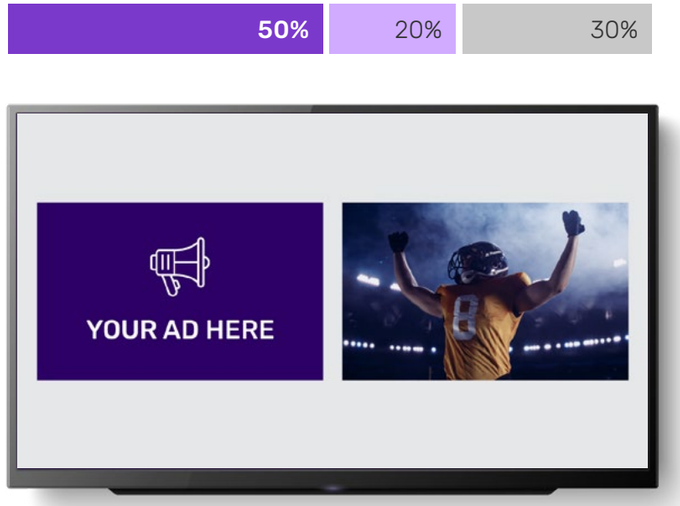
Sentiment toward ad types[2]

This ad works well in live sports | Neutral | This ad does not work well in live sports

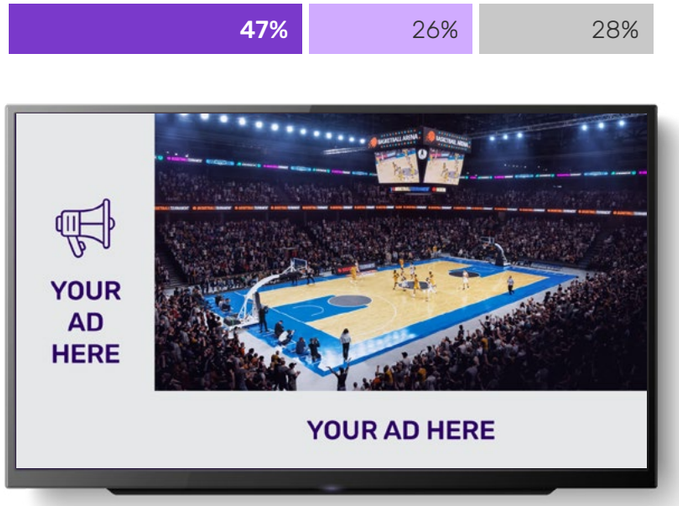
Lower third



Picture in picture



Frame ad



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KEEP VIEWERS CONNECTED

Greater advertiser variety can reduce viewer fatigue

Traditional commercial breaks still have a place in live sports, with 55% of viewers saying 15-second and 30-second ads work well.

But repetition can weaken the experience: Among viewers who find sports advertising disruptive, 45% point to seeing the same ads repeatedly. Across all viewers, 39% want to see a wider variety of brands.[2]

Expanding the demand pool can improve the viewer experience while opening live sports to a broader range of advertisers.

Ad categories viewers say they see too often[2]		Ad categories viewers would like to see more often[2]	
Sports betting apps (40%)	1	Local attractions (29%)	1
Insurance (30%)	2	Small businesses (27%)	2
Pharmaceuticals (27%)	3	Travel and tourism (24%)	3
Telecommunications (27%)	4	Health and wellness (20%)	4
Alcohol (24%)	5	Fast food (18%)	5

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MAKE ADVERTISING FIT THE MOMENT

Contextual relevance helps ads feel like part of the experience

Break-level contextual ads in sports use real-time signals from the game broadcast to match an ad to the moment it follows so the break feels connected to the action rather than an interruption of it.

The same brands' ads landed better simply by matching the moment: +22% more viewers rated them relevant, and emotional engagement rose +37%.[1]

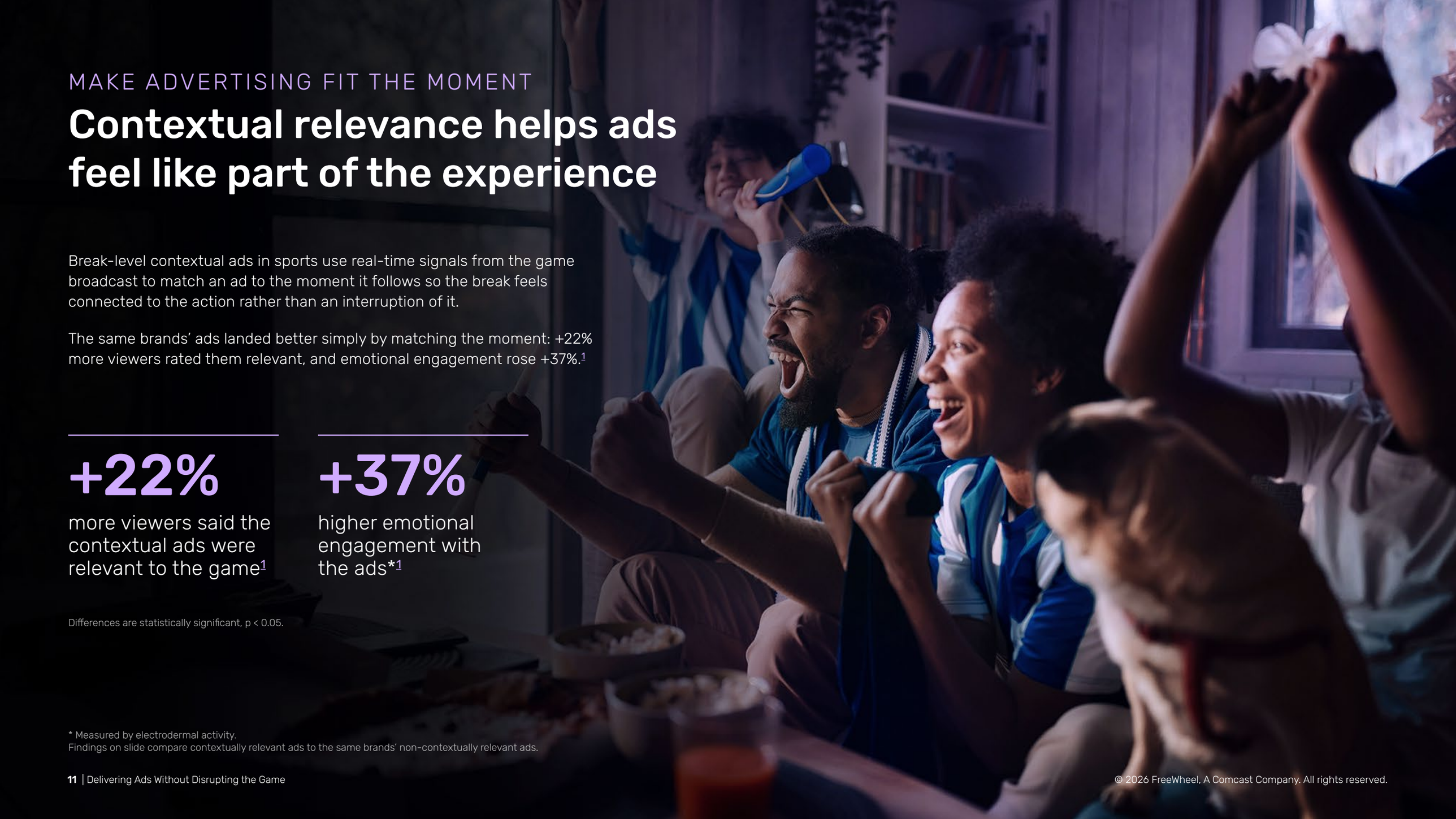
+22%

more viewers said the contextual ads were relevant to the game[1]

+37%

higher emotional engagement with the ads*[1]

Differences are statistically significant, $p < 0.05$.



* Measured by electrodermal activity.
Findings on slide compare contextually relevant ads to the same brands' non-contextually relevant ads.

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Delivering a better live sports ad experience is a team effort

Goal	Publisher actions	Advertiser actions
 **Protect the game** by preparing for the event	Validate ad delivery workflows, creative readiness, capacity, and contingency plans before the event.	Have creative uploaded and pre-approved at least 48 hours before the event.
 **Keep viewers connected** by increasing ad variety and formats	Expand programmatic access and package inventory to bring more advertisers into live sports.	Rotate multiple creatives, messages, and products throughout the season.
	Offer formats that minimize disruption to the game. Make these formats easy to buy and activate.	Select formats suited to the campaign objective and the moment within the game.
 **Make advertising fit the moment** through contextual relevance	Enable real-time contextual signals and break-level targeting opportunities.	Develop creative tailored to sports moments, teams, leagues, or game context.

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Sources

1 FreeWheel study conducted by MediaScience, June 2026. Viewers participated in an in-lab viewing session of sports, n=282.

2 Dynata survey of sports viewers commissioned by FreeWheel, Oct 29, 2026, n=8,750.

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FreeWheel technology is built for streaming and TV ads. We connect buyers and sellers directly, making it easier to access supply and demand. We provide all the tools, data, and insights you need to maximize results. Read more insights on TV and premium video advertising here.



AI in TV Advertising

The Buyer, Seller, and Viewer Perspectives

AI is advancing quickly across the TV advertising ecosystem. This report examines buyer, seller, and viewer perspectives on AI's role in advertising, where those perspectives converge or differ, and what those dynamics could mean for broader adoption across the industry.

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Voice of the Viewer | U.S. & EUR

How Ad Experiences Impact Streaming for Viewers

The U.S. and EUR-focused reports dive into viewer sentiment on streaming, revealing where viewers are satisfied, where they're frustrated, and how advertising impacts their overall experience—offering advertisers and publishers advice on how to ensure the ad experience keeps up with viewer expectations.

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Video Monetization Report 1H 2026

Smarter Advertising, Stronger Results

This edition of the Video Monetization Report examines the trends transforming the ecosystem, from programmatic growth and audience targeting to AI-powered automation and enhanced inventory transparency. Together, these developments are creating a more efficient and connected marketplace for buyers and sellers.

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