

Can 2010 tourism snatch victory from jaws of defeat?

 By [Dr Nikolaus Eberl](#)

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As international tour operators report 25-year low bookings of FIFA World Cup travel packages and local organisers fear profiteering could deter more soccer fans than alarmist reporting about violent crime, is there any way that 2010 tourism can be salvaged with just over 100 days to go? In other words, what can be done to reverse the negative effect of word of mouth and convert international audiences from brand pessimists to brand enthusiasts for Destination South Africa?



Interestingly, the 1994 World Cup held in the US was facing a similar dilemma, when ticket sales were low and even, at the time of the final draw in December 1993, local and international media were highly sceptical of the host's ability to pull off the world's biggest sporting event.

Greeted with scepticism and doubt

The choice of the US itself as host for the World Cup Finals was greeted with a combination of disbelief, hoots of derision, and scepticism among journalists, commentators, and professionals, both within and beyond the US. Even at the time of the final draw (held six months before kickoff), analysts were predicting a low turnout and general apathy.

Wrote USA Today commentator [Tom Weir](#): "The World Cup draw is Sunday and admit it, you don't care. And no matter how much this event gets crammed down your throat... you still won't care. But don't feel guilty about it. There's a good reason why you don't care about soccer, even if it is the national passion in Cameroon, Uruguay, and Madagascar. It's because you are an American, and hating soccer is more American than mom's apple pie, driving a pickup or spending Saturday afternoon channel-surfing with the remote control."

Overshadowed by OJ Simpson

Even the opening day was surrounded by misfortune. The opening ceremony was emceed by Oprah Winfrey, who fell off the podium while presenting. In addition, Diana Ross was supposed to score a penalty right at the end of her performance, splitting a goal in half. However, she sent the ball wide to the left, but the goal still split open, for no obvious reason at the time.

And, to add insult to injury, the opening match was overshadowed by an internal event that would keep US audiences glued to their screens for years to come.

Remembers correspondent [Don Watson](#): “Suddenly a groan issued as live coverage of the soccer tournament was suspended to bring live coverage of an even bigger, unfolding sports drama: former all-American football star and media personality O.J. Simpson's flight from the system of justice. On the screen appeared a white Bronco being pursued along a Los Angeles highway by a phalanx of black-and-white patrol cars and a swarm of police and media helicopters. The start of one of the USA's longest running sport-related stories of all time was upstaging the Soccer World Cup.”

The commercially most successful world cup

Despite all the early setbacks, ultimately the 1994 World Cup turned out to be the commercially most successful FIFA World Cup of all times. [Said Sepp Blatter](#), then FIFA general secretary: “The 1994 World Cup produced a turnover of [US]\$4 billion with 32 billion television viewers. I mean no disrespect to other sports by saying that even the Olympic Games cannot compare. The World Cup was a fabulous success.”

The average attendance of nearly 69 000 shattered a record that had stood since 1950. To this day, the total attendance for the final tournament of nearly 3.6 million remains the highest in world cup history, despite the expansion of the competition to 32 teams in 1998 (from previously 24).

Soccer savings key to success

In the final analysis, the key to reversing the opinion polls and reaping record profits for the host's hospitality sector in 1994 was a media promotion titled “The 1994 World Cup Soccer Savings Spectacular”, which included a national freestanding insert with consumer cents-off coupons and a sweepstakes tied to the 1994 FIFA World Cup that was distributed widely through Sunday newspapers and offered affordable packages for world cup visitors.

A 2010 Soccer Savings Campaign, aimed at cutting out the middlemen and arresting 2010 greed, could achieve similar successes as the 1994 showpiece.

In fact, this is exactly what the local organisers of the 2008 UEFA Champions League Final in Moscow did when hospitality providers were hiking their rates by up to 500% and the anticipated crop of 50 000 visitors from the UK was in danger of dwindling down rapidly.

City authorities clearly stated that they would fine any hotel found to be charging more than 30% over its normal rates during the Final period. By all accounts, the visiting fans left Moscow highly impressed with the country and the way they were treated, and many of them expressed their intention to come back on vacation.

The [2009 Indian Premier League](#) organised in record time (21 days from conception to completion) by South African authorities is testimony that we can still snatch tourism victory from the jaws of defeat - that is, if all 2010 stakeholders stand firmly behind the brand, rather than short-term profiteering.

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