

# a branded world

PODCAST

with  
**Luiza Campos**



036 | THE DOUBLE-EDGE SWORD OF CULT BRANDS WITH RYAN POPOWICH

**EPISODE TRANSCRIPT**

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## A BRANDED WORLD PODCAST – 036 | THE DOUBLE-EDGE SWORD OF CULT BRANDS WITH RYAN POPOWICH

- Luiza Campos: [00:00](#) You're listening to a branded world podcast, episode number 36.
- Announcer: [00:08](#) Welcome to a branded world podcast where we explore great brands and give you tips, tools, hacks and guides to create brands that captivate clients and drive growth in revenue. And now your host, Luiza Campos.
- Luiza Campos: [00:27](#) Hello everyone and welcome to another episode of a branded world. A branded world is a member of the Alberta podcast network powered by ATB. Are you a sports fan? Do you have any sports team that you root for? Most of us to one degree or another have a sports team of any kind of support. It could be baseball or basketball or soccer, football that we grew up with. We grew up watching them and that we root for and usually the team we root for is the team from our local community or the community we grew up in. Often this would be an activity that you would share with your family, like you would be watching a game on tv with your family or you would go with the games with your family or one of your parents. So often these experiences where a bonding experience, and this is the case, even if you're not sharing that experience with family and friends, sports teams are often a symbol of the community that they are in.
- Luiza Campos: [01:26](#) They become a rally point and a way of uniting communities and providing a sense of belonging. Sports teams become part of our identity. They help us form bonds, memories and build a sense of community. We even self identify as fans, not consumers, and that's because we feel part of that team sometimes even feeling that we have a direct impact. You know some people who don't shave for the whole season because they feel if they do, they will affect the outcome or they have to always wear the same Jersey at all games. There's a lot of superstition and even if we're nowhere shape or form evolved with the team, we still feel that our actions can have an impact on that team. We become incredibly loyal to our team and that bond is so strong that even if we move, usually we still root for our regional team and we can become highly protective sometimes to an extreme.

- Luiza Campos: [02:26](#) We have all seen the fights and extreme behaviors of fans. That behavior is driven from the fact that we have a relationship with our favorite sports team. We have a deep emotional bond with his teams, one that we feel deeply connected and loyal to. This loyal connection in deep emotional bond is of course the stuff that most brands dream of having and work so hard to achieve, but as desirable as these deep loyalty and connection is for a brand. It comes with a high level of responsibility and expectations. In today's episode, I am talking to Ryan Popowich, which the Director of marketing and promotion for the Calgary Sports and entertainment corporation. Ryan is responsible for for brands the Calgary Flames, which is a professional hockey team. The Stampeders, which is a professional football team, the Roughnecks, which is a Lacrosse team, and the Hitmen, which is a major junior hockey team.
- Luiza Campos: [03:30](#) Of course, all the listeners from Calgary or even Canada will know the sports teams, but for those listeners who may not have heard of those teams, I needed to explain who they were and they are all beloved teams. In our community and of course have a very large loyal base of fans. In this episode we talk about the relationship that this sports brands have with your audience and how they managed to nurture that relationship and meet the audience's expectations, whether you are at one of the lucky brands that already have very strong, deep emotional relationships with your audience and have a very loyal audience or not. This episode provides great insights on what it's like to have such loyal brands and a such deep emotional connection with your audiences. I hope you enjoy this interview with Ryan Popowich. Hi Ryan. How are you?
- Ryan Popowich: [04:33](#) I'm doing excellent.
- Luiza Campos: [04:34](#) That's awesome. For those listeners who are not familiar, as we have listeners from all over the world, can you tell us a little bit about the brands that you represent?
- Ryan Popowich: [04:44](#) Sure. So the Calgary flames probably the primary brand and most recognizable part of our business, but actually our organization is made up of a few different brands and this is kind of a trend that happens in a sports entertainment nowadays. Uh, is that a primary, um, brand a large brand like the calgary flames in, in a, um, a large nationally will acquire other sports entities just to fill

dates in their venues and things like that. So we're actually under the umbrella of Calgary sports and entertainment and within sports and entertainment. Not only do we operate the Calgary flames, but we also operate the Canadian football league team here, uh, the Calgary stamperders and we have a national lacrosse league team as well, the Calgary roughnecks and we also operate a major junior hockey team, the Calgary Hitmen. So, uh, we actually have four brands within our organization, but uh, the flames obviously are the most lead brand that we have in the most recognizable and obviously a lot of the resources and, and, and whatnot are shared between all the teams, but we are essentially one big happy family

Luiza Campos: [05:53](#)

that poses a whole new set of challenges as well. Because you have sort of your main brand as you, you mentioned being the flames and then these other brands. How, how is the relationship between them or are they treated as very much individual brands with their own specific audiences or is there any relation between the four brands?

Ryan Popowich: [06:16](#)

That's a great question because it's actually something we debate and and work through internally, so obviously we're our own competition in on some dates in terms of a marketing dollars in and brand affinity and things like that, but there's also a ton of crossover in terms of people who come or people who have affinity for one brand. They also have similar affinity for other brands. There's lots of shared audience between the four teams that we have, but then again at the same time, you know when you have one sort of a very, very strong brand, a large brand established brand like the flames, there is a bit of the other teams living in the shadow of that team. So these challenges in terms of, like I said, competing against ourselves, but it works well because like I said, there is lots of connections in terms of audience between all the teams.

Ryan Popowich: [07:06](#)

It works better in this day and age in terms of the cost of doing business, uh, having shared resources. So a lot of these, uh, you know, like our smaller teams wouldn't get the same kind of resources or support on their own so it works really, really well and they get a lot more support in terms of marketing and operations and things like that because they're under a larger umbrella. So there's positives to that definitely. But in, in a lot of ways, uh,

there is a uniqueness to each and every one of those individual brands and there's nuances to each and every one of their, their audiences. So we have to be nimble in terms of how we, um, uh, market to a, each of those audiences with within those brands. But again, there's lots of connections, lots of similarities and that's sort of the high level stuff in terms of, you know, what sports entertainment and what sports means to, uh, you know, a particular market.

Ryan Popowich: [08:02](#)

And then how those values to translate down to America because doesn't matter what team or sport we're involved with or in any other market. All teams and this uniqueness of, of this business is we have a, you know, a social contract with our audience and I mean, we're behold to that we take it very seriously and everything we do, we strive to nurture that, that contract. And, and when I say we have a social contract way, what I mean by that is that, like it or not, we're, we're by default in a lot of ways. We're a representation of a, the market we're in. So we represent our city with all of our brands in particular, just with the Calgary flames were recognizable, were iconic to our market, but more so because there was an emotional connection with our audience. We represent individuals a lot of ways and when we take that seriously.

Ryan Popowich: [08:57](#)

So when you're a fan of the, uh, of any of our teams, a lot of times fans feel like they're, they're a part of the team and they should, because that is what's inherent with, with sports. And it's a unique situation. It's not like other businesses and a lot of ways. One of the analogies we often use here is, is, uh, you know, it's not like we're selling pizzas are a company that sells pizza like a domino's or something like that. A lot of people love domino's pizzas. They can choose whatever pieces they want. Maybe they choose Domino's for pizza hut or, or whatever brand they choose, but they often come to that brand because that product, they liked the product that tastes good to them, uh, and they choose it over others. And it's different in sports in that, uh, sometimes you're born, it's passed down through generations.

Ryan Popowich: [09:43](#)

You didn't get a choice. So who cheering for a, that's where you grew up in, in, in your, uh, within that sort of social makeup that's a, you became, you were a fan when you were born. So, um, or because you live here because you're a calgarian, like I said, there's that

connection of we represent you. So you want your, your affinity for our brand is because you live here too and you're also a calgary. And so just a unique situation. You don't usually find that like I've seen other sort of traditional businesses or organizations, but we find that, you know, it's a unique situation and a unique scenario and, and we, we take it seriously.

Luiza Campos: [10:21](#)

That's exactly one of the reasons I'm so interested in talking to you and I'm so interested in the brand over sports team because you're absolutely right. I mean you don't even call them consumers, their fans and that we would be silly to call to call them consumers and, and the word fan kind of explains it a little bit. It's, you have that, as you mentioned, that huge emotional connection with the team either because he was transferred to you by your family was influenced upon you or because of the place you live and usually it even happens if you move right. You will still be a fan of that team that you grew up with. That is from your hometown. There's that really strong bond that exists between a sports fans and of course the sports teams. So it poses a whole set of opportunities and challenges because of course, many brands, they strive to have that emotional connection that sports fans already come with. Right. But in the other hand, I think it sets the bar really higher, much higher than, than any other brand for you in terms of how you manage the expectations that these fans have with your brand. So can you talk to me a little bit about that? Uh, do you feel you have to provide to a higher set of expectations or how is that relationship with fans different, you know, from, from other consumer brands?

Ryan Popowich: [11:47](#)

It's definitely a double edge sword, like a, as you mentioned, there's so positives with having, um, you know, a fan base instead of a consumer base, uh, because you get the added value of having a built in audience immediately, even before we do anything. One prime example of that would be like a back to my pizza analogy, you know, if you're making pizzas and people are constantly buying your pizza because you're making very good pizzas and they like the taste of it. And if your quality of your product goes down, people will stop buying your pizzas. The thing with sports is even if there's a dip in the product, people will still, they would still consume your product. A, you know, true fans, hardcore fans. Uh, there's still a, a, a baseline of core fans, a core audience that we wouldn't lose whether we win or lose.

- Ryan Popowich: [12:34](#) So, and that's unique situation. And I know other businesses, man, I wish I could have that all the time, but it is a double edged sword because like I said, it is an emotional connection. They hold us to a standard and we have to hold ourselves to a standard. Like I said, that emotional connection equates to a representation of them and their market and the them as an individual. So yeah, it's a higher standard. So it's a bit of a pressure situation and a lot of ways. And like how do you deal with that? So the easiest way for us in terms of it is just holding to our values. And a lot of that comes from, you know, boiling down what our business is and long and the short of it. And to be totally frank is, we're in the entertainment business obviously. I mean if we had to label the type of product we sell it, it's 100 percent entertainment and that's what we're selling.
- Ryan Popowich: [13:22](#) But because it's in the sports realm and because we have that social contract in a unique, a connection with our, with our consumer who is a fan, it's really not just the entertainment business that we're selling or entertainment that we're selling. It's really the experience we're selling. So we're really in the experience business because it's not just being entertained. Like you go to a movie, you sit in this theater, uh, you know, you buy your ticket, you sit there and when the movie's done, you're done and you leave. Um, when you come to consume a, our product, in this case, it's more than just a watching the product on the ice of the product, on the field for whichever brand you're, you're consuming with us. Uh, it's the experience of that. It's a how you feel when you enter the venue, uh, how the team performs and how you, how you feel connected to other fans within the venues.
- Ryan Popowich: [14:15](#) So that's unique situation. It's a different type of transaction a than other businesses. So, um, yeah, it's, it's, uh, it's a, it's unique, like I said, but it's a, it's a worthy challenge. It really is because the results from that and use you see it when, you know, when the cities united and when we're, when we're winning or if there's a championship involved and you can see it in any other market and the same sort of vain is, uh, it's, it's electric and it's amazing and it's, and it's unifying. So the amount of positive value you get from being in the sports entertainment and being successful far outweighs any challenges that we face in terms of being pressured or held to a higher standard, you know, the, the risk is far

worth the reward. So, and that's how we always look at it in terms of holding to our values and, and, and selling what, you know, what we, we, we sell is really the experience.

Ryan Popowich: [15:09](#)

And it made changes a lot of ways, how we view how we execute and it makes it easier, like I said, because we know the results are, are, are worth it. And then to be frank, the other sort of major pillar that we hold on is like, you know, that's the, that's the business we're in, we're in the experience business. But, and again, part of that social contract, that connection to our fan and, and being held to a higher standard is also the results of results in us wanting to give back, uh, and contributing back to our community. I mean, that's, it's paramount. It's absolutely has to happen when you're in the sports culture. It has to happen in any market. And you can see that in any, any team, any market you have to give back because of that connection you have because of that contract do you have. And just like all of our fan base there, calgarians. And so everyone here who works for the organization and uh, whatever we do give back. And I mean, it's easy to write a check and say, you know, I'm just going to give back dollar for dollar, but or thought process behind anything we do is always being able to affect change and affect positive change because that's really what we're doing. We're in the experience business, we're in the positive experience business. Where are you here for positive change as well when we give back?

Luiza Campos: [16:28](#)

Completely agree with you. You're in the experience business unit, community building experience. I feel because you such an integral part of this community call, we wouldn't be what it is without the flames and vice versa. And you're so right. I mean, you know the entertainment business, yes, that's part of what you do, but it doesn't make it justice to, to what you really do because those experiences can be so remarkable and so memorable and so inspirational for so many people. Right? And it really pulls the, the community together as well. I mean, as a brand, you know, it's so interesting that as you said, you, you already have this built in audience that are two fans and will support you through the good times and the bad times, which is amazing, but this sense of ownership that they have with the brand also has those demands on you, right?



- Luiza Campos: [17:22](#) Because there's higher standards and you do need, I feel to probably communicate more often with your fans or more regularly or more different ways than other brand would be expected to do because it's almost an expectation, you know, they need that, that conversation. I feel they need that connection. So can you tell us a little bit about, first of all you've mentioned you know, your brand and the values of hold true. So if you could tell me a little bit about those and then how do you connect with your audience, with your fans on those values?
- Ryan Popowich: [17:57](#) There's lots of different ways because there's different sides to how we connect. Like you said, that was a really good sort of way of looking at it in terms of, uh, you know, our audience having ownership though they physically don't own the team a or have a stake in the team, did you have an emotional stake in the team? So they have, you know, emotional ownership within the brand. So we constantly have to engage our fan base obviously in the day of a day and age of social media. That makes it a lot easier because you get their direct feedback immediately, uh, in fact instantaneously like when games are happening. So obviously you have to have with any sports organization nowadays is very, very robust in nimble sort of social media content team who constantly engages a, our fan base. And again,
- Luiza Campos: [18:42](#) Because I would imagine it's so much more engaged audience than any other consumer brand.
- Ryan Popowich: [18:47](#) Sure. Right. And again, back to the pizza analogy and spend and those and other brands, I mean if you're selling a particular product, you may have social media account people will or, or a customer service line and people phone you. But our customer service line is always open 24 slash seven, seven days a week. It's a constant call and engagement from our customers. We're constantly hearing from them. They were here for them all the time. And that's the beauty of it. And then again, this is a double edged sword, but because we have this contract or engagement level is probably far higher than in most organizations in terms of other industries and, but again, there's, there's also the benefits of that is you hear directly from your fans. So you know, we do a lot of events, like a lot of events for season ticket holders and ticket holders and the fan base directly where we

can, where they can engage with us in terms of both sides of our operation.

Ryan Popowich: [19:34](#)

And when I say both sides, I mean the actual product side in terms of if we're talking about the flames, actual hockey operations, so the coaches and players and things like that. And on the other side is also the, uh, sort of the operational side, the Admin side, folks like myself who were in on the marketing side and the sales side. And people who run this side of the business as well, I mean we have to engage our fan base on both sides of the coin all the time, so when we don't ignore any of them, that's just the way it happened. So events like having fan rallies and then having a season ticket holder events, those things are very, very important to constantly keep the lines of communication open with our, with our brands. And then in terms of representing me know what we do.

Ryan Popowich: [20:17](#)

I mean that that giving back to the community and holding those values. Like I said, the entertainment part is, is one part of it, but giving back directly is the most tactile thing we do is we see that our foundation, so the foundation then we have foundation set up for all of our brands but they sort of flow up into the foundation and we. When I said we affect positive change, that's what we're. That's what the foundation is set up for. So it's an easy way to facilitate that. Lot of stuff happens in the background, but this, the structure in which we affect those in the distributors, those changes directly, so it's really centered around having key programs that deliver on the things that we're talking about. So we built programs around, you know, are key sort of targets that we're always trying to give back as you know, we want to do everything for our market, but um, you can, you have to sort of stay focused in terms of what you can and can't do and do things that you can do doing really well.

Ryan Popowich: [21:13](#)

So we sort of focused on things like health and wellness and education and an amateur and grassroots sports. Those are sort of our key developments that we, we want to affect change on. And then that's where we build programs and move funds towards in terms of grants and things like that. So it starts from the top and that's just instilled when you get, when you join this organization, it's just part of our DNA because when you're in sport, sports, entertainment, like I said, there's that social contract. It's just, it's part of the DNA. It's the

expectation the market sets the standard for us and we have to answer to that call and it's the expectation. No one ever questions in terms of what we give back because like I mentioned before, is we're calgarians to, so being part of the community, representing the community, but being an active member of the community because we have the wherewithal to do it, that's what we're going to do. And that's just part of a day to day. Everything that we as part of the package, uh, something we wouldn't ever shy away from.

Luiza Campos: [22:14](#)

And one of the things that again, interests me so much in terms of sports teams is, and you mentioned this earlier, any sports team in the community already comes with the sets of values that are in the existing. The community already kind of become part of the brand because of the support team is part of the fabric of the community. So those values become part of your brand already. And at the same time, you know, you have four different brands in, in your specific case with the flames, the stamperders, the roughnecks, and the hitmen. And each of them have each own sort of individual or uniqueness about the brand. So how do you manage, you know, having brands that shares some, some of the same values in the community, but at the same time had their own unique flavor,

Ryan Popowich: [23:05](#)

you know, the community definitely influences our brand. So being in being an active member of the community, that is a lot of the onboarding right there. That's a lot of the teaching and learning and integration of whatever brand you are for your market and for us, as long as you first and foremost a calgarian and you'll see first and foremost what is expected of us from our community because our community drives our brand. I mean in the ways that we represent ourselves in terms of imagery and graphics and things like that and the colors we choose, those things are drawn directly right out of our community. And then the things in terms of that we execute, um, you know, events and, and how we interact with community. Those are definitely are made directly as a result of what our community wants and needs. So if you're not an active member of our market, if you're not an active calgarian, you won't see that if you just sort of hiding in your home and you never interact with our vibrant city and that's one of the best parts about being in this market is, is being in a very vibrant market where everyone is very active and there is lots of interaction.

- Ryan Popowich: [24:11](#) So you get to see first hand, you get to hear firsthand, you know, what your community wants. So those things permeate into your brand, the influence, exactly who we are and how we represent. So again, when people come to our brand and are working for us and there's change and yeah, they come from different markets and they know how that market works or they've experienced that market. But the same process happens over here and that's why it's really, really important that anyone who works for our organization, from, from the players, like I said to the Admin side, they're active in in the market and if they're new to this market, yeah, they come with sort of the baseline of what sports the sports industry is all about. They know what the expectations are, but being active and engaging in the market, that's where they really learn who we are and what this brand is all about.
- Luiza Campos: [24:58](#) You must have such amazing stories that you know, you may pause and think, well this is, this is exactly what we stand for. This is exactly what we're here to do. Can you share with us any of those that may come to mind? Either stories that you hear from, from fans or things that you see the players do.
- Ryan Popowich: [25:18](#) The true sort of gauge where we can see is, is you know, if people want to see hard numbers and things like that, I mean those things exist in terms of how many dollars we actually give back to the community, which is I believe in the last year, over \$2,000,000, pretty much annually gets, gets donated back in terms of programs and commitments and those things are wide ranging. I mean they, like I said, they stick them those sort of three core areas that we're always looking for in terms of health and wellness and and grassroots. So we stick all those things but I mean in dollars or dollars and that's great. But yeah, there's just so many instances of positive change and the best part is, is they happen almost instantaneously. Like we effect change directly. A lot of it's short term, but there's also a lot of longterm and that's sorta the, the total benefit of what we're looking for is when we established programs, we established programs because we know this is going to benefit from this year to next year and down the road.
- Ryan Popowich: [26:14](#) And that again is born right out of how sports entertainment works. Like I mentioned before is like sometimes you're born into the affinity for our brand so that a lot of the executions we do or are built in the same

way is that we know that we're going to, like I said in the very, very beginning, it was like we nurture that social contract. So a lot of the programs we do in terms of education or health and wellness are designed to last the long haul and probably outlast us in some cases. They're designed to be a legacy for our community. Well obviously, like I mentioned, one of our main pillars is we're in the entertainment business and we know we're in the experience business. So I mean

Luiza Campos: [26:58](#)

What are the plans for the future? Do you see these brands evolving in the near future?

Ryan Popowich: [27:03](#)

The future really is the new wave of entertainment that's, that's happening. We're seeing that in other markets in terms of how entertainment is being delivered in, in other markets. Like people are demanding more and more entertainment or demanding a centers of entertainment and they're demanding it. Lots of variety of entertainment, so we know that the future holds, it will be a part of that, whatever that looks like and regardless of what venue we're in or how we deliver that. Again, what really matters. You know, a venue is somewhat material, but we'll never sort of waver from what our core goal is and that's delivering on entertainment. So I know there's lots of plans in the future for Victoria Park and the river district and around this area where our venues situated right now and that's really exciting to us because that just heightens the idea of a, of us being part of really condensed and delivered entertainment area and I know will be the center of that in a lot of ways.

Ryan Popowich: [28:03](#)

So just like we share with our venue on the stampede grounds and we're a part of the excitement that happens down here. That's part of being a calgary and what, how we have fun and how we are entertained is very, very representative of our community. So we're always going to be a part of that. And we're really excited to whatever the future holds in terms of how it develops a in this market specifically when we talk about how entertainments evolving, especially sports entertainment, it just getting bigger and bigger in terms of what's delivered and what the expectations are. Uh, I think we've seen this lots, especially in the NHL and the other professional league, just obviously right now we're in the middle of, of NHL. We just finished an NHL playoffs in the Stanley Cup was just a word. So we saw in places like obviously like Vegas and Nashville and how they sort of

increase their entertainment value for their fans and how fans react to that.

Ryan Popowich: [28:57](#)

So that's what the consumer's demand now. And we're obviously a everyone and not just us. We're going to. Everyone has to step up their game in terms of what we deliver to our community is, like I said, we have that contract with them and if that's what the community wants, that's what they're going to get. So we're going to spend a lot of time evolving in terms of how we deliver our entertainment and uh, what that total package is gonna look like. So there'll be lots of changes coming down and in seasons to come with, you know, how we deliver in, in things that we do. So lots of value added there for sure. That's like I'm on the horizon. One of the things we always discussed, and again going back to that idea of this is how sports works in sort of having a passed down to you and starting generationally.

Ryan Popowich: [29:40](#)

We're always in, in an engagement with a next generation of fan. So, and again, this is a very unique time, uh, just in the world in general in terms of the next generation in terms of the technology we have and what their expectations are in terms of entertainment and what their expectations are in terms of representation in their community and how they want to effect change. That is going to be a prime focus here and it is now and it's going to be as every year passes a more and more of a prime focus of how we honor and engage our, you know, our next generation. So I know there's lots of consumer and in marketing buzzwords about, you know, engaging Gen z and, and all kinds of, you know, the different audience segments that are up and coming. But for us it's just the next generation of fan. That's again, part of the commitment that we have with our social contract, with our fan base and our consumers that we have to engage them in and be representative of them. So the coming years you'll see, um, that's what's on our horizon is, is more, uh, engagement with that generation.

Luiza Campos: [30:43](#)

What you said is really important for any brand. It is about engagement. It is about building those relationships while they engaging in purchasing your product or outside of that experience as well is how are you engaging with your audience? How you keeping that relationship and building on it. You know, it's about engaging the new generation as well as honoring where you've come from. And the people who have helped

build this brand to what it is today and the community in general because in particular for a sports brand, I mean you have those die hard fans that have passed their love for the brand to their kids and their grandkids, so it's really important to maintain that connection as well as building on the interests and on the expectations and the demands of the future generation. So amazing that you've seen that and you're looking into continue doing that for, for the brand. Thank you to spend the time today to share with us about these brands and the work you do. We really appreciate it.

Ryan Popowich: [31:44](#)

Thanks very much for having me. It was a pleasure.

Luiza Campos: [31:47](#)

I hope you enjoyed this interview and please make sure to check atb or atb is always hiring and it is a great company to work for it. It has such a strong brand and such a strong culture. So if you happen to be looking for a position, make sure you check atbs linkedin page to see how you might fit in during the month of June the Alberta podcast network is conducting a listener survey. We would love to hear from you, so if you happen to have a few minutes, please go to Alberta podcast network.com/forward survey. I will have the link in the show notes, but that url again is Alberta podcast network, all one word.com/forward survey. Thank you so much. And until next time.

Announcer: [32:38](#)

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