



# The Personalization Playbook

How AI and data are shaping the  
future of sports engagement

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An original research whitepaper from Apply Digital



# Unpacking the personalization landscape

No matter how you look at it, the passion of a dedicated fan base is fertile ground for deep engagement through personalization. While each team and league is different in terms of their budget, priorities, resources, and stage of their digital transformation, they all share a common goal — to build stronger, more meaningful connections with their fans. So it's no wonder that, whether looking at football or golf, at the professional or college level, or in the United States, the UK, or any other region around the world, the global sports industry is at the forefront of personalized digital experiences.

Drawing from our exclusive survey of 400+ leaders across industries, Apply Digital's report highlights key sports findings, offering insights into how teams and leagues leverage personalization, face challenges, and focus next. With the sports industry's pioneering approach to creating meaningful fan connections through innovative technologies, we wanted to understand what's working, what isn't, and which strategies they plan to prioritize moving forward.

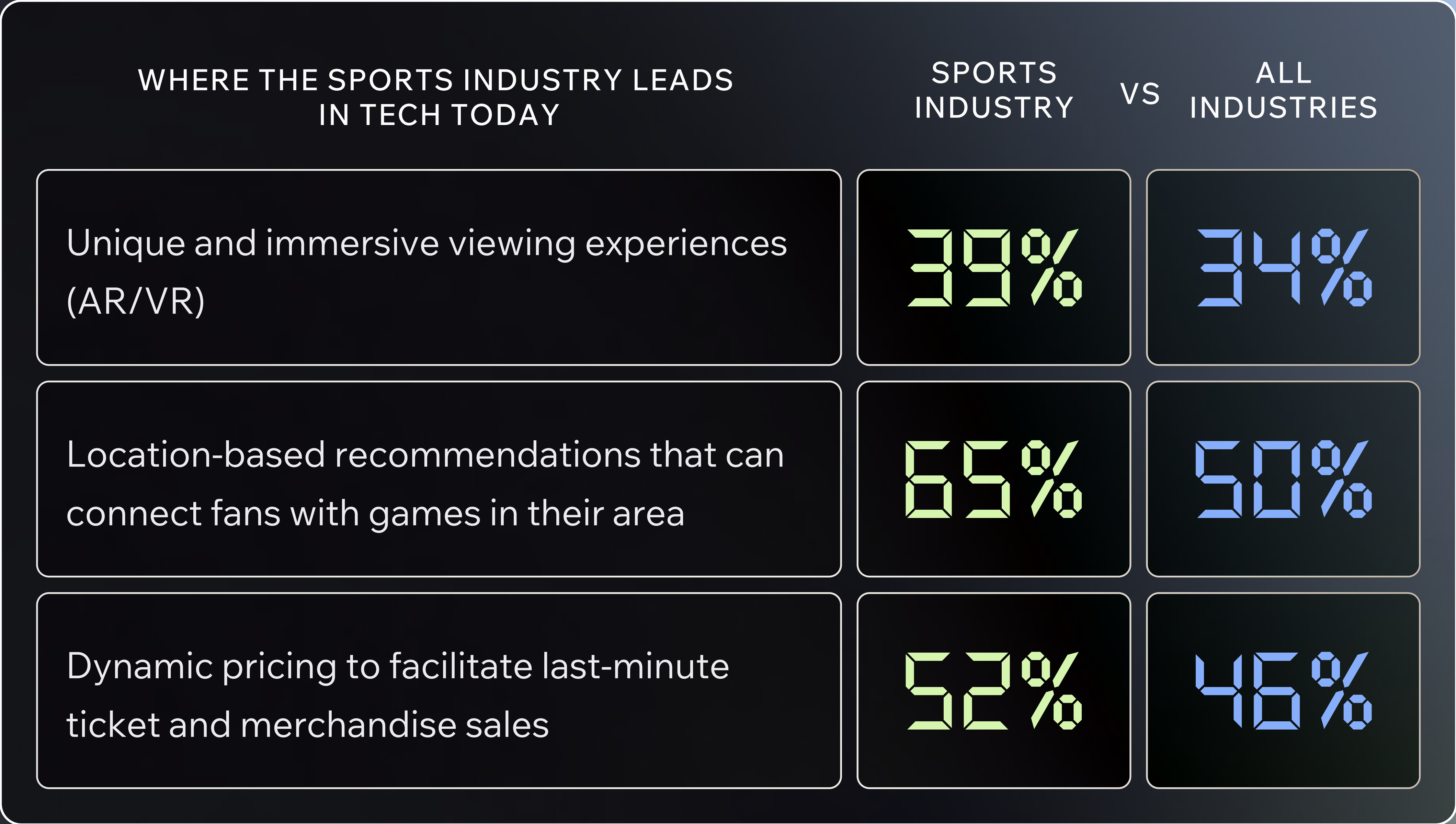
With increasing competition for fan attention across countless channels and devices, the lessons learned offer valuable insights for other industries striving to deepen audience engagement.

At Apply Digital, we count two of the largest professional sports leagues in the world as our valued clients, so it's fair to say we have 'skin in the game' when it comes to helping maintain their position at the forefront of personalization. In this whitepaper, we'll distill the most relevant insights from our exclusive report, 2025 Leadership Priorities in Personalization, across three main themes with a sports lens: Consumer expectations and competitive pressures; the rise of AI-powered personalization; and navigating challenges to effective personalization. Businesses of all types can leverage these learnings to help develop their own personalization and digital experience strategies for 2025.



# The current moment: consumer expectations and competitive pressures

Whether looking at the fans, the players, the teams, or the games themselves, the sports industry is inherently personal — and that shows up clearly in the level of investment placed on personalization within it. **Half of sports industry leaders say they will spend between \$2.5 and \$3.75 million USD on personalization initiatives in 2025,** compared with just 23% of those across other industries. Further highlighting the sports industry’s significant investment in these initiatives, 68% of those in other industries report spending plans in the lower \$550,000 to \$2.1 million USD range. With this kind of investment, it's clear the sports industry is poised to solidify its leadership position with cutting-edge digital experiences.



However, considering the event-driven nature of sport, a higher investment of just 5-15% shows that there is clearly a lot of room to capitalize on the passion of the fans and the spectacle of the games — especially when it comes to the viewing experience.



When it comes to understanding how sports organizations plan to use technology to address engagement challenges, a close look at their investment priorities over the next 12 months provides a clue.

Personalized product descriptions that test to identify which descriptions resonate with which fan segment, enhanced search capabilities to improve the user experience, seasonal adjustments to keep fans engaged with personalized offers and promotions in the off-season, and storing customer preferences or favorites to allow for the delivery of products and experiences that will resonate most with them all stand out from those outside of the sports industry.

### Personalization priorities



“The sports industry is built for personalized fan experiences, with endless data and AI-driven insights capable of shaping everything from player performance to media storytelling. By leading with AI, and looking at opportunities with tech like AR, teams can deliver immersive, tailored experiences — bringing fans closer to the game than ever before.”

Scott Michaels

CHIEF PRODUCT OFFICER





# The consumer perspective

Consumers polled in the survey shared that price-led value offers stand out as the most effective way customers respond to companies using personalization:



61% of respondents also said they're willing to trade personal information for personalized experiences. But many are only comfortable doing so if they have control over what data is shared.

“Loyalty in sports is all about building meaningful connection and staying relevant in a fan's life. When we recognize the multitude of ways to be a fan and reflect that back through personalized experiences that deliver real value, we create deeper relevance and lasting affinity. The pieces are finally coming together to make this possible at scale and, when used thoughtfully, they create value for both the fan and the organization.”

Cressida Murray  
STRATEGY LEAD





# What this means for business

Businesses looking to lead in personalization to enhance engagement should consider that:

- ♥ Differentiation will increasingly hinge on who can offer the most personalized, engaging, and emotionally resonant experiences. Businesses who leverage AI to understand and anticipate fan desires, create more personalized marketing and engagement strategies will build stronger, more enduring connections with fans and customers.
- 📱 The integration of AI into sports personalization strategies must be thoughtful and fan-centric. It's about using technology to amplify the excitement of game day, personalize delivery across digital platforms, and provide fans with unique, tailored experiences that deepen their connection to their favorite teams and athletes.
- 👤 The sports marketplace represents a unique opportunity to drive engagement not just on game day, but throughout the year. Strategies that leverage experiences capable of keeping fans involved year-round are more likely to drive meaningful conversions and deepen loyalty.



# The rise of AI-powered personalization

As the power and utility of modern AI models have increased in recent years, so too has the sports industry's interest in leveraging AI tools in the context of personalization. The passion of sports fans means that many are primed and hungry to engage with sports-related content, offers, and experiences that speak to their unique preferences, and AI is already helping sports organizations unlock opportunities to more deeply engage with those customers at scale.

This use of AI is helping sports organizations streamline operational processes to boost engagement and drive revenue, particularly in areas including channel optimization and outreach. Knowing the stats in the table to the right, it's no wonder that 92% of sports respondents said they believe their AI budgets are enough to keep up with the competition.

INTEREST IN AI-POWERED CAPABILITIES	SPORTS INDUSTRY	VS	ALL INDUSTRIES
Leaders describe their organization as being in an advanced stage of integrating AI into the customer journey	32%		20%
Leaders who plan to spend between \$2.5 and \$3.75 million on AI-enhanced personalization over the next 12 months	44%		17%
Leaders who plan to spend more on AI technology over the next 12 months	86%		81%



# Looking forward: Agentic AI

**Agentic AI** refers to autonomous bots that operate on behalf of consumers to execute tasks, complete transactions, and interact with other AI agents — and it's closer to reality than many might think.

**Nearly 50%** of sports industry leaders are preparing to deploy infrastructure to allow consumers to use AI agents to transact online.

**But just 46%** of consumers are interested in using agentic AI — with 45% saying they are not interested at all.

**Companies should** build interfaces for bot-to-bot transactions, strengthen security to protect data, and balance AI with human interaction to enhance customer experiences.

## AI evolution:

The New Jersey Devils are developing “Bott Stevens,” an AI chatbot described as ‘agentic’ to assist fans with tickets, stats, and merchandise using real-time NHL data for a highly personalized experience.

"Sports teams and leagues can no longer just be about the game — they need to embrace technology like AI to thrive. While teams excel at the sport itself, they now need digital tools to personalize fan experiences, identify new audiences, and turn casual viewers into passionate supporters. The industry has never had more opportunity — or more urgency — to evolve."



Brian Browning

VICE PRESIDENT,  
ENTERPRISE SOLUTIONS



# What this means for business

As AI-powered personalization continues to gain traction, companies should focus on strategies that provide measurable ROI in the near term. This must begin with the identification and integration of essential data sources for powering personalization from across the organization (e.g. financial, commerce, customer experience). Leaders should also prioritize experimentation while laying the technical groundwork for the arrival of agentic AI, which will be here sooner than most businesses expect.

## How to set your business up for success in 2025:

-  Review data protection infrastructure and security practices to ensure consumer protection and trust
-  Ensure financial, customer, and commerce data are not siloed, and are available for personalization initiatives
-  Identify which classic personalization tactics you're currently using that could be enhanced with AI, and invest accordingly
-  Develop KPIs to measure the effectiveness of AI enhancements to ensure investments are delivering value for money
-  Invest in AI-driven experimentation platforms to identify conversion strategies that optimize the entire personalization portfolio
-  Prepare for the arrival of agentic AI by investing in infrastructure to support bot-to-bot transactions



# Who's doing personalization well

**Manchester City (Premier League)** provides fans with a dedicated fan engagement platform, Cityzens that leverages AI combined with fan data to deliver tailored emails, push notifications, money-can't-buy experiences, first-to-know of developments, and matchday experiences.

## Takeaway:

Striking a balance between fan data and AI can make serving up the right content at the right time and keeping an audience engaged look easy.

**Futbol Club Barcelona** has embraced AI to analyze fan data and deliver personalized content, all while managing to work around a staggering debt of €1.35 billion. By tailoring articles, videos, and social media posts to individual preferences, they've greatly enhanced engagement and delivered a 25% increase in the time fans spend on their platforms.

## Takeaway:

You don't always need a massive budget to create a big impact with personalization.

**Golden State Warriors (NBA)** is continuously enhancing their fan-focused Warriors App using 30+ user-facing data sources with 100M+ data points to refine the experience for each individual fan. From favourite players to their top picks for game day food options at the stadium, it provides fans with an experience that's uniquely their own.

## Takeaway:

Identify valuable customer data to create truly unique experiences that go beyond surface-level preferences.



# Navigating personalization challenges

Collecting and organizing customer data is key to delivering personalized experiences, especially in the sports industry. So perhaps unsurprisingly, the majority of sports leaders in our survey (53%) report their CDP as “definitely” robust enough to manage customer data, while the majority in other industries (44%) ranked their own as only “somewhat” robust. However, considering the importance of an effective CDP in facilitating personalization, that still leaves significant room for improvement for nearly half of all sports respondents.

Adding to the challenge in sports, competing aggregators like ESPN often own a significant share of valuable fan data. While there are opportunities for leagues and teams to work with aggregators to fill in the gaps, the scale and complexity of the relationship and available data can make that difficult to achieve. However, it’s challenges and opportunities like this that make AI-powered personalization even more attractive in the sports world.

Despite data issues caused by their relationship with aggregators, the reason most organizations struggle with incomplete or inconsistent data isn’t a lack of access to it — often, it’s the opposite. Without a highly capable CDP, organizations struggle with a massive amount of fragmented data across various systems and platforms. This makes it incredibly challenging to collect and organize the valuable signals and patterns hidden in the noise.

## This leads to:



Incomplete fan profiles, as data from ticket sales, merchandise purchases, and digital interactions remain siloed.



Inconsistent data quality, making it difficult to create accurate, unified views of fans.




Inability to leverage the full potential of first-party data, which is crucial to delivering 1:1 personalized experiences.




# What this means for business

Business leaders looking to address these challenges effectively in 2025 and beyond need to consider:


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 Personalization requires data readiness — whether breaking down data silos, upgrading old tech, or getting creative with tight budgets, companies that want to stand out need to embrace composable (i.e modular, scalable and easily replaceable) infrastructure.

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 Data analytics teams and tech stacks must be ready to support AI-powered personalization. But how? What are the best ways to personalize experiences without getting “too personal for comfort” — and without breaking the bank?

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 This is why the value of a composable tech stack can't be ignored. Capable of ensuring seamless interoperability across fragmented ecosystems, these solutions are seemingly tailor-made for enhancing personalization in the sports industry.

However it's accomplished, one thing is clear: businesses that take a strategic approach to personalization and balance innovation with customer trust will have the edge. Inaction is death in this industry.

Put simply, businesses increasingly are leaving money on the table by not understanding their customers and anticipating what will drive engagement.

Those who don't take action risk falling behind in a world where customers expect brands to know them, understand them, and deliver experiences that align with their desires.



# The final word

Personalization is a necessity for organizations to thrive in an increasingly fragmented digital world, and while each team and league is at their own stage of digital change, and working with their own unique budgets, priorities, and resources, this is even more true in the world of sports. Each and every fan engages with specific sports, leagues, teams, and players in their own individual ways, across numerous platforms. This makes tailoring experiences to individual preferences essential for capturing and retaining fan attention. Holding that attention is the key to success in the industry — and the reason that sports organizations tend to lead the way when it comes to adopting the strategies and technologies to do so.

Uniquely different from other industries thanks to the passion of fans, the presence of sport across cultures, and the sheer number of methods for consumption, sports organizations are working with a 'product' that needs to keep consumers continuously engaged year-round. With this in mind, personalization in the industry needs to focus on driving that continuous engagement to get more seats filled, sell more merchandise, keep fans watching, and get them cheering for more.

At Apply Digital, we understand that establishing meaningful engagement and strong loyalty starts with personalization. From sports and entertainment to retail and CPG, creating exceptional experiences requires not only the right technology foundation but also a deep, data-driven understanding of audience preferences — what they love, what they expect, and how to exceed those expectations. By ensuring that every strategic and tactical decision aligns with business goals, all while keeping your unique audience at the heart of the experience, you can set both your organization and your audience up for the most rewarding experience possible. [Connect with our expert team today](#) to learn how personalization can take your engagement efforts to the next level.



Are you looking to  
up your game with a  
winning engagement  
strategy?

Speak with one of  
our expert team  
members today to  
[get started.](#)

