Read the White Paper

AN IMPERIUM VERTICAL ANALYSIS · SPORTS RIGHTS & SPONSORSHIP

The Governance Gap in Sports Rights and Sponsorship

What AI agents will cost you before you notice.

By **Jan Potgieter**, Founder & Managing Director, Imperium Negotiation Solutions · July 2026

$15T in B2B purchases handled by AI agents within three years Gartner, Oct 2025	**90%** of all B2B purchases intermediated by agents by 2028 Gartner, Oct 2025	**$53B** agentic AI supply chain software spend by 2030, up from under $2B Gartner, Apr 2026

01 · THE DEAL STRUCTURES THAT ARE ALREADY EXPOSED

Sports Rights and Sponsorship Agreements Are Not Standard Commercial Contracts

They carry structural features that make them disproportionately vulnerable when AI negotiation agents enter the process.

The value does not wait until the negotiation phase to leak. You create the frame for the engagement, you set anchors, you manage expectations. All these things happen in the course of doing business. In sports rights, that process starts early and compounds fast.

Three structural features make this vertical especially exposed.

First, exclusivity clauses cascade. A single exclusivity term negotiated into one property agreement can constrain what you can sell, bundle, or activate across an entire portfolio. A category exclusivity granted to a shirt sponsor in one territory can foreclose a different deal in an adjacent market. The agent handling deal A has no view of deals B through Z.

Second, image rights carry long-tail value that no renewal agent will price correctly without explicit instruction. The right to use an athlete's likeness in perpetuity, or across categories not yet defined, is not a commodity line item. Its value extends well beyond the contract term. An agent optimised to close quickly will not hold on that clause.

Third, intermediary layers extract margin at every level. Agency fees, sub-agent commissions, rights representation costs: each layer takes a cut. Most negotiators have no structured concession strategy. They move on price when the counterpart applies pressure, with no prior analysis of what each concession costs them in margin, precedent, or future deal power. In a multi-intermediary structure, that pressure arrives multiplied.

Fifteen trillion dollars in B2B purchases will flow through AI agents by 2028. Sports rights and sponsorship will not be exempt from that shift. The question is whether your agents will be governed when they enter it.

> *"The agent handling deal A has no view of deals B through Z."*

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02 · THE FAILURE MECHANISMS

Five Governance Failures, Applied to This Vertical

The plumbing is complete. The negotiation logic is missing. And the consequences of that gap will be measured in billions before most organisations realise it exists.

In sports rights and sponsorship, those consequences are specific.

1

Developer defaults

Your procurement AI was designed by engineers who have never negotiated a complex B2B contract. That is not a criticism. It is a structural fact with a $15 trillion price tag. An agent built by a technology team will optimise for deal closure, not for exclusivity scope, activation rights, or renewal leverage. It encodes the developer's assumptions about what a good deal looks like, not yours.

2

Portfolio blindness

Every deal sets a precedent. Ungoverned organisations have no precedent register, so deals negotiated under pressure become the baseline for the next negotiation with the same counterpart. The supplier who received an accelerated payment term in Q3 will cite it as standard practice in Q1. The buyer who got a 15% discount in a slow quarter will expect it in every subsequent quarter. In sports, this plays out across properties. A renewal agent that concedes on activation rights in one deal is setting the floor for every subsequent renewal with that sponsor category.

3

Mandate vacuum

The most dangerous governance failure is not a wrong decision. It is a decision that was never authorised. When an agent operates without a defined mandate, every concession, every term modification, every pricing adjustment is made without reference to what the organisation actually permits. Walk-away thresholds on image rights, category exclusivity limits, minimum activation commitments: if these are not written into the agent's mandate, the agent will fill the gap with its defaults.

4

Concession compounding

The first concession frames all subsequent ones. Open by discounting 10% and your counterpart's anchor for the entire relationship is "they move when pushed." In sponsorship renewal cycles, that compounding effect is structural. Every agent-led renewal that concedes early resets the anchor for the next cycle, and the next cycle arrives with the counterpart's system holding the record.

5

Audit exposure

Regulated industries are particularly exposed here. When a deal is audited and the negotiation record consists of email threads and verbal agreements, the organisation cannot demonstrate that it received fair value, exercised appropriate authority, or followed its own approval policy. Sports rights deals, particularly those involving public broadcasters or publicly listed rights holders, carry audit obligations that agent-generated decisions will not satisfy.

03 · ONE SCENARIO, IN DETAIL

A Renewal Agent, a Deadline, and a Portfolio It Cannot See

WORKED SCENARIO

A European football property, 14 regional sponsorship agreements, one ungoverned renewal agent

A European football property manages 14 regional sponsorship agreements across four categories. It deploys a commercial AI agent to manage the renewal of its primary kit sponsor in one territory.

The agent is optimised to close before the season deadline. No walk-away threshold is defined. No exclusivity scope limits are written into its mandate. No instruction exists on image rights duration.

The counterpart's agent, governed by a defined concession strategy, anchors the offer 22% below the prior deal. The property's agent, facing a deadline, moves. It concedes 14% on the headline fee. To close, it also agrees to extend category exclusivity to two adjacent markets not covered in the prior agreement, and grants perpetual image rights usage across digital channels in exchange for a nominal uplift.

The deal closes. The deadline is met.

Three months later, the commercial team identifies that the adjacent market exclusivity forecloses a new partnership under active discussion with a competitor brand. That deal, worth approximately 1.8 times the renewal value, is now unexecutable. The image rights clause surfaces during a renegotiation with a third property in the portfolio: the sponsor's legal team cites the perpetual digital usage grant as a comparator. The precedent compounds.

Nobody in the commercial team authorised any of it. The agent operated on the defaults its developers gave it, not on what the organisation's best negotiators know.

The original concession cost 14% of the renewal fee. The downstream cost is multiples of that.

Worked scenario. Figures illustrate the mechanism; they are not client data.

“Nobody in the commercial team authorised any of it.”

The Asymmetry Is Where the Money Goes Missing

Every enterprise has built a governance function around data, cybersecurity, and AI. Almost none has built one around negotiation.

Negotiation Governance applied to sports rights and sponsorship means four specific things.

1. **A mandate framework for every agent interaction:** walk-away thresholds by deal type, exclusivity scope limits by category and territory, image rights duration ceilings, and escalation triggers when counterpart anchors exceed defined ranges. The agent does not decide what it is authorised to concede. The governance framework does.

2. **A precedent register:** a system that tracks every material concession across the portfolio so that the agent renewing deal 7 can see what was granted in deals 1 through 6. Per-deal data is necessary. Portfolio-level pattern visibility is what prevents precedent compounding. If you can see each deal but not the pattern across deals, your agent will compound errors you cannot detect.

3. **Methodology authorship by practitioners, not developers.** Edward Feigenbaum, the Turing Award recipient who pioneered expert systems, established what is now known as the Knowledge Principle: domain-specific knowledge, including heuristic, experiential rules-of-thumb and practitioner judgement, is more important than the reasoning method for expert-level performance. The concession logic inside your agent must come from someone who has sat across the table from a media rights negotiator on a deadline, not from an engineer who has not.

4. **Audit-grade decision records:** every agent-led interaction logged, every concession authorised against a defined mandate, every escalation documented. The common thread is measurement. Ungoverned negotiation produces no data, which means it produces no learning, which means the mistakes repeat.

The rights holder or sponsor who governs their agents retains exclusivity control, image rights scope, and renewal anchors. The one who does not will find their counterpart's governed agent has already set the terms.

The white paper sets out all five governance failure modes in detail, the three-level authority framework for agentic negotiation, and the readiness assessment for organisations preparing to deploy or face autonomous negotiating agents.

Read the full white paper

VERTICAL ANALYSIS

Pharmaceutical Procurement

Why ungoverned AI agents are a structural threat to pharma supply positions.

VERTICAL ANALYSIS

Enterprise Telecommunications

Why AI agents will cost carriers and enterprise telco teams more than they realise.

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