



GEORGE PYNE

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[WPP](#) has stepped into the increasingly lucrative arena of sports rights, setting up a new agency to represent the likes of the Cleveland Cavaliers basketball team, Manchester City of the English Premier League, and the England and Wales Cricket Board.

ESP will be a 150-person unit that sits within GroupM, WPP's media-buying arm. It intends to take on the likes of IMG, Wasserman and Infront in selling sports rights across the world.

This is a meaningful number of people in terms of specialist capability," said Jonathan Lenson, the head of strategy for ESP Properties.

"We have just started working with the Cleveland Cavaliers to help them sell outside North America in terms of global sponsorships and partners," he added. "City Football, which owns Manchester City, is also looking at global partnerships — anything from sponsors on training kits to a global personal care provider, for example."

The Cavaliers include LeBron James, the National Basketball Association's leading player.

The new agency will build on WPP's [investment in Bruin Sports Capital](#), which aims to spend some \$250m on buying up sports rights. Bruin is led by George Pyne, the former president of IMG's sports and entertainment division.

"WPP is the single biggest investor into Bruin and this company will work with Bruin in the deployment of capital. George Pyne is very well connected and Bruin will buy up sports rights from the sales side," said Mr Lenson.

"They have five people in there," said Jonathan Hill, who will lead ESP in Europe, the Middle East and Africa. "That's a lot of chiefs and not many Indians. We have 150, so they are leaning heavily on us from an operational perspective."

In February, [Dalian Wanda](#), the Chinese conglomerate, [bought Infront](#) for €1.05bn from Bridgepoint, the private equity firm.

"It is about our global network. Obviously everyone is interested in Asia and what we can do there. We will sell wherever there is a market for tier-one rights. That means selling US properties overseas but also helping them to understand their home markets," said Mr Hill.

The initiative is the latest sign of WPP's ambitions to become a force in media and entertainment beyond advertising. Over the past decade it has acquired stakes in Oscar-winning US independent production studio The Weinstein Company, Hollywood studio Media Rights Capital, YouTube multichannel network Fullscreen and Vice Media, the youth-focused media group that was last year valued at \$2.5bn.

WPP has also funded the production of television programmes through GroupM Entertainment, such as a series on Cilla Black's rise to fame on ITV last year. Sir Martin Sorrell, WPP chief executive, has argued

that owning intellectual property gives the holding company a strong foundation from which to grow even as the global media sector becomes increasingly fragmented.

In 2013, Sir Martin admitted that he had missed his chance to buy IMG, the sports marketing group. “We would love to own IMG,” he said at a sports conference. “But, no, we cannot afford it. People are talking about \$2bn to \$2.5bn. That’s nosebleed territory for us.”

<http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/e4c0c02c-fd7f-11e4-9e96-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3aoSPtGol>