

SUCCESS CASE

Taking the fight to the fraudsters:

How the Royal Belgian Football Association tackled Euro 2020 counterfeiting with Sportian Content Protection.



The client:

Brand counterfeiting is a crime that steals billions of dollars from legitimate businesses every year and its threat to the global sports industry is growing.

With the rise of international ecommerce, the ability of fraudsters to rapidly produce and sell illegal branded merchandise has increased immensely. Sports bodies and their partners are in a race to protect their trademarks and ensure the proceeds of merchandise flow back into the game itself.

In the run up to Euro 2020 this summer, The Royal Belgian Football Association (RBFA) was seeing increased interest towards the Belgian international team, but this also increases the risks from counterfeiting activity.

The RBFA wanted to respond quickly before the tournament began, while also sending a strong signal to its industry partners that it was taking the threat to trademarks and copyright seriously.

For this reason, the federation contacted Sportian Content Protection, subsidiary company of Sportian. Engaging this artificial intelligence solution, the federation has been able to move at the same speed or quicker than the counterfeiters.

In a short period of time, the RBFA identified over 4.500 pieces of counterfeit merchandise, of which 94% were subsequently delisted and removed from the retailer's platform.



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Protecting the brand:

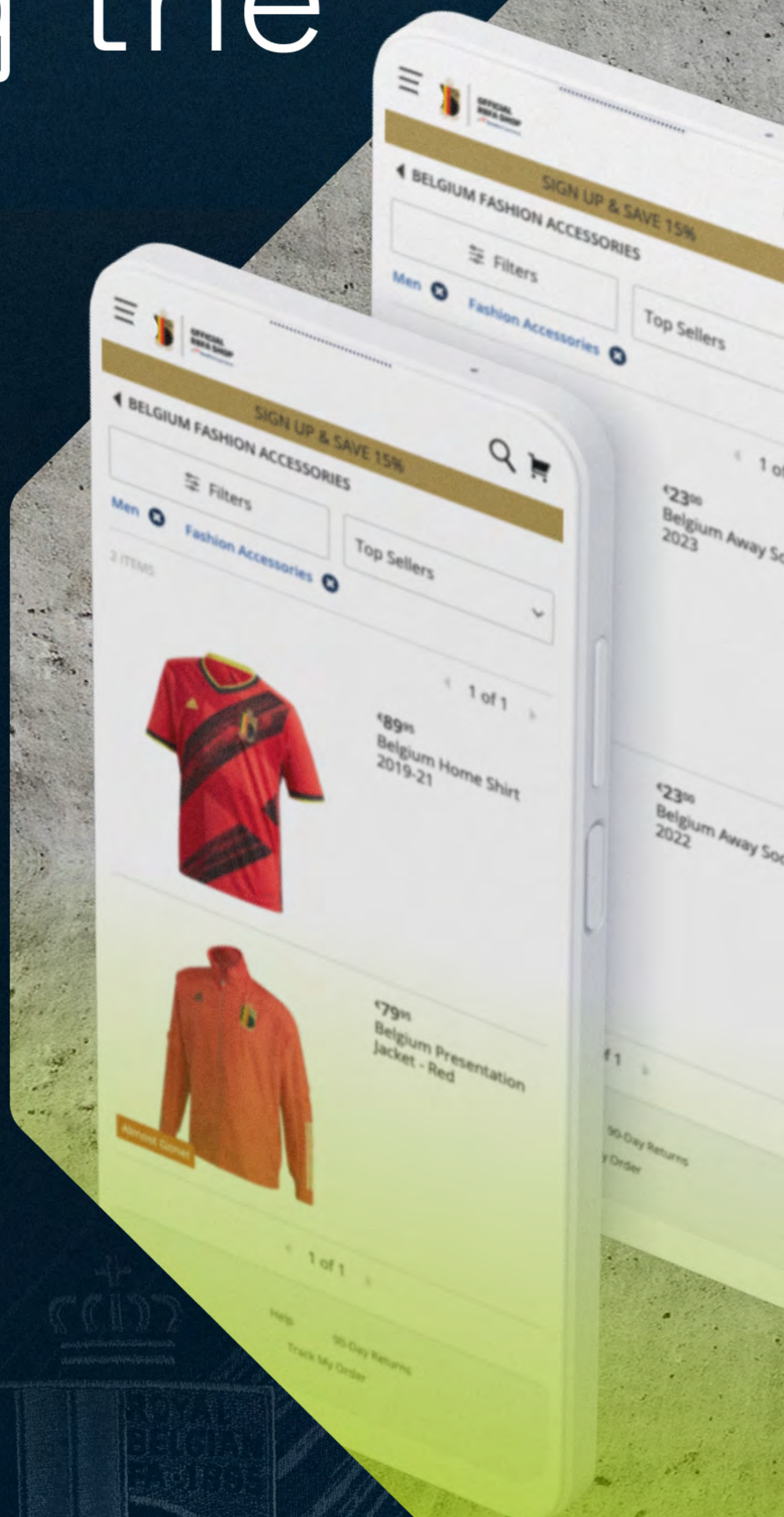
While the RBFA was aware that it needed to tackle the problem, convincing all stakeholders of the sheer scale of the issue was challenging at first.

Thibault Viaene, legal counsel at the RBFA commented: “I knew there were solutions in place, but initially we were unaware of the true scope of the problem, especially on the international level.”

“I think some people really underestimate the amount of counterfeit products being sold globally on social media, for example, and also those platforms like Alibaba or Etsy.”

While the RBFA was able to exert some control over fraudulent products at a national level, internationally it was struggling to keep up. Sportian Content Protection’s partnerships with the world’s major online marketplaces presented an opportunity to begin a global anti-counterfeiting operation.

“The thing that really convinced our colleagues was the fact that by working together with Sportian Content Protection, we could finally cover the international scene,” Viaene added. “That was the most important element.”



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Turning the tables with Sportian Content Protection

Previously, the RBFA had tackled counterfeiting using manual processes. Staff would individually go through online platforms such as Amazon or Alibaba to identify fraudulent products and sellers and would then have to go through a lengthy and cumbersome process with those retailers to remove the offending items.

While that approach would score occasional victories, it was failing to make a serious dent against those producing and selling the merchandise, who would simply close one account and open another before the RBFA or retailers could react.

With the Euros approaching, the RBFA needed to adopt a faster approach and teamed up with Sportian Content Protection, its purpose-built AI and automated monitoring tool that tackles online trademark infringements.

Through continuous image searches and data filtering across online marketplaces, based on RBFA's product whitelists, trademark certificates and pricing information, illegal products can be identified in seconds and action can be taken to remove them.

On top of this, the Sportian Content Protection team provides a weekly consultancy session to evaluate how the tool is performing and what changes could be made. "These calls are really important as it gives us regular insights into how the tool is working and how we can collaborate better," said Antoine Nokerman, legal counsel at the RBFA. "This combination of human and technical support has really made a difference."





Outmaneuvering the counterfeiters

With Sportian Content Protection, the RBFA could go beyond simply identifying counterfeit products to securing their removal. Using Sportian Content Protection's pre-existing partnerships with online retailers ranging from Amazon and Alibaba to eBay and DHGate, the prohibited items and sellers were swiftly taken down, meaning the product had been removed from sale and could not spring up quickly on another platform. The improvements were immediate.

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As for illicit URLs offering counterfeit merchandise, the AI spotted over 17,000 links across the web, with 87% taken down- a vast improvement compared to the results from manually checking such sites.

"We didn't expect Sportian Content Protection to be as immediately effective as it was, actually," Viaene said. "It has had a very, very positive impact in our fight against counterfeit goods."

The federation noted that these numbers have not decreased since the end of Euro 2020, suggesting that the issue of fake merchandising does not solely exist around major tournaments and requires continuous focus.

While the problem of brand counterfeiting and illegal merchandising remains a significant challenge to the sports industry, using technology to fight the fraudsters significantly tilts the balance of power back in favour of the legitimate organisations which want to invest the proceeds from sales back into the game.

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