The challenge

Tennis is a sport that is firmly based on tradition. This has meant that previous attempts to change the experience of participants have often been met with resistance – which has inhibited the ability of the sport to develop new and innovative products.

In 2010 the International Tennis Federation recommended that children under 10 use low-compression balls and smaller courts. This change was exactly what the sport needed to expand Hot Shots from a marketing campaign into a national junior tennis program.

In addition to delivering a product that participants would respond to with enthusiasm, Hot Shots would also boost the earning capacity of the sport’s many dedicated coaches.

The approach

Part one

The starting point was to research levels of enjoyment children have playing modified versions of tennis versus traditional tennis.

The research reveals that when participants hit more balls, they have more fun and increase their skill acquisition. Equipment plays a critical role in this as larger and slower balls provide more opportunities to control the balls. As children increase in age, longer rallies are more enjoyable and allow better development of tactics as there is more time to make decisions than with faster, smaller balls.

Additionally, the research showed that progression through levels based on skill rather than age was important to both children and parents.

The ultimate gain for the sport has been with its commercialisation strategy. It has digitally created a value proposition for users and for commercial partners. The sport is also able to segment and understand the interests and needs of the people engaged with netball – an understanding that is now also available to sponsors and a great commercial asset for the sport.
Part two

Tennis set up a working group with key stakeholders to develop – based on the research – the Hot Shots philosophy, as well as the strategy to increase delivery and broaden the reach of the program.

As Hot Shots was developed as a value proposition for coaches, the sport provided them with a starter kit of modified equipment and lesson content, and launched a marketing campaign at a local and national level. Hot Shots was also integrated into every interaction between the sport and the coaches, including education courses.

Under the program, tennis coaches pay a small fee to deliver Hot Shots – the coaches derive clear and tangible value from the program. In return for delivering Hot Shots, coaches receive a $2 rebate per registered child to claim Hot Shots equipment.

Tennis also worked closely with the Australian Council for Health, Physical Education and Recreation (ACHPER) to develop Hot Shots so it would meet the needs of schools, teachers and the national curriculum.

Tennis also worked with schools to increase the confidence of teachers, and provide professional development in line with curriculum needs. Schools received equipment packs and teachers had training (either online or face-to-face) so they could deliver Hot Shots with confidence. As with coaches, schools also receive a rebate per registered child to purchase more Hot Shots equipment.

Similarly, the sport engaged with university so that Hot Shots and its philosophy could be incorporated into Physical Education (PE) degrees, and also invested in digital requirements for the program, including a digital platform for registration, data management and promotion of Hot Shots.

Invested in the marketing of the program. This drives market demand so parents ask for coaches that deliver Hot Shots.

What Tennis Australia has discovered

Tennis’ successful commercialisation of Hot Shots is as a result of a quality program that is based on consumer needs, and a solid strategy for implementation, delivery and growth.

The market demands Hot Shots, parents seek coaches that deliver Hot Shots and coaches want to deliver Hot Shots.

The program is now the second biggest junior program in Australia, with 140,000 registered participants in 2013–14. It has also secured a strong partnership with naming rights sponsor ANZ, which actively leverages its sponsorship to increase the number of children involved with Hot Shots.