

GIBBS & SOELL

Insight

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The Sport of Full-Contact Public Relations

As businesses seek to fine-tune the ways stakeholders interact with their brands, products and people, the public relations strategists who manage these experiences face a dilemma. Balancing stretched resources and a business mandate to deliver results, PR communicators surveying the current media landscape are wondering which channels will lead most efficiently to the audiences that matter.

On one hand, social media continues to grow in its appeal. Two-way audience engagement, ease of measurement and an attractive return-on-investment are the hallmarks of a social strategy. In comparison, traditional PR efforts such as event management, trade shows and media road tours tend to fall out of favor because their production requirements are labor- and budget-intensive.

But as social media basks in its limelight, have face-to-face engagements undeservedly gotten a bum rap among PR planners?

Full-Contact PR

A caravan of PR staffers traveling with clients and their promotional gear to destinations far and wide doesn't always send the right signals. The rising awareness to "go green," coupled with heightened cost consciousness, has undoubtedly contributed to the loss in ap-

peal of some marketing activities that create bigger carbon and budget footprints.

But relationships are still based on human contact, right? There's also logic in going to where your customers are.

A growing number of PR communicators are finding their customers in stadiums, arenas and playing fields. One

area of "full-contact" PR that has bucked the trend is sports marketing. Although interest in branded sports activities waned when recent economic conditions deteriorated, it's coming back strong.

Sponsorship researcher IEG forecasts that sponsorship spending on sports is expected to reach \$18.2 billion in North America in 2011, up 5.2 percent over 2010. This appears to be an upward trend, with 2010 revenue at \$11.6 billion, up 2.7 percent over 2009.

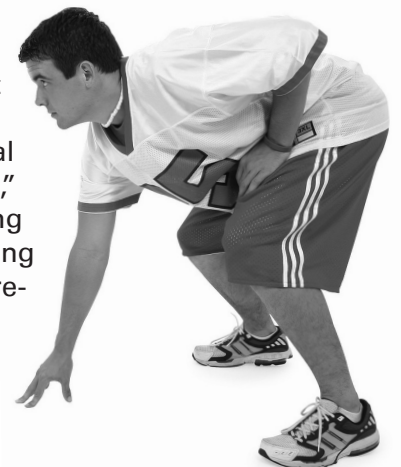
The appeal is obvious. Sports venues can offer a relaxing atmosphere where business can be conducted face-to-face without ceremony. When the brand is paired with the right sports event, the experience for a customer or journalist can be simply memorable.

Contrast that with trade show floors where PR professionals have to elbow their way through a crowd to a business contact and compete against other brands at the same event.

B2B Gets in the Game

Sports sponsorships are no longer the exclusive realm of consumer brands. More and more business PR strategists are leveraging the value of aligning their corporate brands with sports brands and personalities as part of a high-impact audience experience.

CME Group, a derivatives trading marketplace, is like many other B2B organizations: It doesn't have a simple story to share with its customers. "In the fast-paced, ever-changing financial services industry, it is increasingly important to find innovative ways to reach existing and potential customers and influencers," says Anita Liskey, managing director, corporate marketing and communications in a recent *PR News* article.



Ms. Liskey explains that business communicators at CME Group discovered that partnering with sports organizations such as the Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA) helps to "... further expand awareness, build our global brand and attract a worldwide audience that matches our demographics." Access to the LPGA Pro-Am was originally launched at the same time as CME Group's Global Financial Leadership Conference, which featured opinion leaders such as Tony Blair, Bill Clinton and Paul Volcker. Creating a dual platform for thought leadership and a sports experience proved to be an outstanding opportunity for CME Group's executives to strengthen bonds with the company's top customers who hobnobbed with powerhouse business influencers and golf's best competitors.

Integrated Marketing

To many communicators, a balanced marketing campaign can be the most important, yet most under-utilized aspect of a sports sponsorship program.

From the actual live event that crystallizes the brand experience for the customer and journalist to everywhere else a touch point may occur, the messaging must be consistent and integrated across public relations, advertising, promotions, event marketing and internal communications.

For example, if you have retained the services of an athlete for advertising, a promotion, or participation in a client event, you should also consider leveraging those appearances for PR purposes. It is relatively easy to carve out 15 minutes for a high profile exclusive interview, which can dramatically strengthen awareness of your overall sponsorship and your relationship with the journalist granted the access.


Beyond an exclusive, imagine providing a group of report-

ers a behind-the-scenes look at the making of your commercial. While reporters conduct their interviews and capture supporting material via video and photos for use online, they are enveloped in the "insider" experience you have created especially for them.

Face Time

Here are additional considerations to maximize your sports marketing investment for the best possible face time experience with stakeholders:

- **Don't let special promotions be an afterthought.** Even harmless gestures such as giveaways can backfire. In 1995, the Los Angeles Dodgers held a souvenir baseball night for fans. At the bottom of the ninth inning, Dodger player Raul Mondesi and manager Tommy Lasorda were ejected for arguing a strikeout call, which prompted 200 fans to throw their promotional balls onto the field. The game was eventually ended by the umpires when the fans refused to stop.
- **Break through the digital wall and invite online journalists and bloggers to your event.** Many bloggers and news sites cover celebrities, entertainment, travel, health, fashion and food, among other lifestyle news beats. Encourage these online journalists and Web influencers to attend the live event and get to know them personally.
- **Turn to athletic groups as your guide.** Sports leagues such as the NBA, NFL and MLB often serve as your connection into the inner circle in a particular sport. Group leaders value opportunities that advance their sport and can provide important introductions to their extensive network of media contacts.

Even as social media engagement remains on the rise, nothing can quite match the relationships established in a face-to-face opportunity. By creating a unique sports-oriented experience, your marketing effort is sure to hit it out of the park. 

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