SMQ: What are the major marketing challenges facing the Pirates in PNC Park?

A: The biggest challenge we face is the education of our fans. This is truly something special. We have traveled to see new ballparks over the past several years and know the to reach out to that casual customer, capture the atmosphere of the ballpark, and make them frequent customers while also attracting the event searcher to convince them this is the place to be and the place to be seen.

Q: What has been the reaction from the Pirates played at Three Rivers Stadium?

A: From a season-ticket standpoint, we have tried to emphasize the benefits and amenities associated with being a season-ticket holder in the new stadium. For about 3 years, we have creating the atmosphere that fans want to be a part of something special. We haven’t started the individual-ticket advertising campaign, but it will focus a lot more on the team as well as the experience. To accomplish this, we will film the exhibition games to develop TV spots. From an individual-ticket standpoint, we are trying the Pittsburgh corporate community as far as sponsorship is concerned?

A: The reaction has been great. This is the first that we have been able to go to the market with radio, signage, and promotions. In Three Rivers, we didn’t control the signage, so we could not bundle our marketing packages. We have a great relationship with Fox Sports, so we can also include TV in the package if necessary. This too has been a process of educating the market. The typical local advertiser hasn’t experienced a new stadium, so we need to educate them on the impact and the opportunities in a baseball-only ballpark. The opportunities are drastically different than what we had at Three Rivers. Three Rivers was not really a baseball

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A: I think at some points it has, but for the most part we try to focus on the number of dates we have and the number of impressions we can provide. We are forecasting 2.6 million fans through the ballpark in the first year. I believe that separates us from the football stadium.

Q: With the new stadium you now have a new inventory: club seating, corporate boxes, and signage. Has the change in inventory impacted your sales force in terms of how they are selling?

A: Absolutely. Not only are we selling season tickets, but we are also selling club seats with a one-time charter seat license fee ranging from $2,000 to $6,000. It’s a different sales technique. We are stressing impact and effect the ballparks have on cities. Our potential customers, however, haven’t been to the ballparks or been through the experience, so they may not completely understand the impact the new park is going to have.

Q: Has this challenge forced you to change how you sell both season and single-game tickets compared to when the Pirates played at Three Rivers Stadium?

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the amenities and benefits of club seating, which again is part of the education process. We didn't have club seating at Three Rivers Stadium, nor did we have the intimacy. The fans will be much closer to the field. Even with these changes, we still sell down, meaning we start with our top inventory items and work down. Also, over the last 3 years, we have beefed up our staff in the ticket, corporate, promotions, and advertising sales areas.

Q: Has your experience with the Cleveland Indians and being involved with the opening of Jacobs Field been beneficial?
A: It has been invaluable. Having been through it has enabled me to forecast some things and be better prepared for the potential obstacles. Because there are so many unknowns in opening a new property, I can't say the experience at Jacobs Field provided every answer, but they certainly have been helpful.

Q: The Pirates organization is leaving a stadium with a lot of history and memories in both baseball and football. Have there been any negative feelings from the fans about leaving Three Rivers?
A: I think there is an excitement about the new ballpark. Three Rivers was a great venue in its time, but it was never a baseball venue. It never had the intimacy of a baseball park. Everyone cherishes those memories, but the excitement we are seeing from our fan base for a baseball-only ballpark with real grass and a skyline that opens to the city has been overwhelming. There has been nothing negative relative to the new park.

When a change is made from one venue to another, a long-time season-ticket holder may not have as good a seat in the new venue. Has this been an issue in Pittsburgh?
A: We've heard that concern, but I am fairly confident that once the fans get into PNC Park, a park designed for baseball, they will understand the site lines. Technology has helped us significantly in this as well because a new or current customer can go to our Web site and see a virtual view from each and every section in the stadium. This technology has been a tremendous asset for us in addressing the question "Where will my seats be?"

Q: What type of fan-loyalty or fan-identification programs will be instituted in the new stadium?
A: We are looking into using the swipe cards, but from an access perspective, we have electronic turnstiles. Through the bar-code identity system for season-ticket holders, we can determine which fans are coming to the game and which ones aren't, and also when they are coming and at what entry point they enter. After the first couple weeks of the season, we'll have a significant amount of data to help us operationally but also with our marketing information system.

Q: Have you been very successful in selling box seats and club seats?
A: We sold 65 suites, our entire inventory, in 8 weeks. As of this interview (mid-February), we have sold about 65% of our club seats. We have an inventory of 25,000 club seats and have sold about 16,000, so we still have some work to do in that area.

Q: As the only tenants in a baseball-only stadium, are there any plans of using PNC Park for other purposes beyond the baseball season?
A: Currently there are no plans for other activities. Obviously, we are very sensitive to maintaining the grass, so I think before we head down that road; we would have to be in the park for a while.

Q: What advice would you provide someone in your position that is about to start the process of opening a new facility?
A: I would suggest that members of the organization tour as many new facilities as possible, regardless of the sport. We learned as much from touring football, basketball, and hockey facilities as we did in baseball facilities. We saw things we liked and didn't like in each facility, implemented them, and made our building even better than originally planned.

Q: How much input did you as a marketer have in designing PNC Park?
A: We were involved through the whole process. When I came 3 years ago, there was a blueprint. Once everything was approved, an internal committee with representatives from all the departments in the organization was formed and was ultimately involved in the whole planning process. For marketing, our priority was in creating a place that would enable us to deliver our product in the best manner possible.
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