What is your goal in developing the entertainment aspect of a 76ers game?

Our goal is to provide “the show behind the show.” We know that the primary interest of the fan is to come watch basketball, but we’re trying to appeal to children, families, women, men, young and old, and all races, so we try to do different elements that appeal to all people. We understand that our fans are spending a lot of money, and we need to add value to the experience, whether it’s a giveaway or a contest, or the pre-game, halftime, or post-game entertainment.

We also try to get them involved in the game because they really are a big part of the home court advantage. Again, we understand that it’s about the wins and losses, and fans are coming to see the team, but in this day and age, we’re all competing for discretionary income. The additional added value activities are extremely important, and we’re just trying to be ahead of everybody else or at the very least competing with them.

Does the whole organization buy into what you are doing?

Yes, it’s actually our parent company’s, Comcast/Spectacor, philosophy. We want to provide a “total entertainment experience from the moment they arrive until the moment they leave.” The entire organization plays a part in this total entertainment experience. For example, if we do a Turn Back the Clock Night, it is not just the uniforms the players wear. We want the entire experience to be complete. We turn back food prices, the staff dresses retro, the music that is played is from the year we are focusing on. We even found ways to get the sponsors involved. That is when the fan really has fun with it. The more coordinated effort and the better the communication, the better the experience for the fans. We’re been fairly successful here with some of our promotions. It starts from the top with our chairman [Ed Snider] on down because we won’t be successful if it isn’t a total team effort. We realize that a happy customer is a repeat customer.

With the wide variety of fans, what’s the thought process behind choosing in-game music for such a diverse fan base?

Basketball is such a fast-paced sport; it just lends itself to music. I don’t think we’re going to make every-

one happy because everyone’s taste is different. That is why we continually ask for feedback from our fans through surveys, letters and emails. It’s a continual evaluation process. If we get the same complaints often, then we know there is an issue. In terms of music selection, we break the game down into segments. During the walk-in period, traditionally we use quiet, mellow music as patrons enter the building. During warm-ups, we let the players give us input on music selections that help get them hyped-up for the game. You can’t start the game out with high intensity music and video prompts, as it is too hard to maintain that for two and one half hours. You have to build on the tempo of the game. We usually begin to step up the fan prompts [either music or video or a combination of both] at the end of the third quarter and throughout the fourth quarter. Examples of songs that work in most arenas: This House Is Rockin’, YMCA, Sirus. We also try to create our own favorites. Our goal is to get the intensity level to peak in the fourth quarter. Once the game concludes, we revert back to mellow music for exiting the building.

Music sets the mood. I think that’s why the NBA has been successful marrying itself with the entertainment and hip hop industries. It’s a nice mix and enhances what we do and what they do. It’s a nice marriage for both.

Why has the music and sport relationship worked in terms of live performances at games?

I think it’s that added value I mentioned earlier. If you pay money to come to our game and I can bring you an entertainer that you would like to see in concert, even if it is for a shorter amount of time, I’m giving you added value. The artist feels we give them the exposure of having 20,000 people see them on a given night. If the artist has an album coming out, they’ll do the anthem or a half-time performance. They want that exposure.

I also think the entertainers want to be athletes and vice versa. There’s a lot of crossover in both. I think that’s why you see MTV air their Rock ‘n’ lock basketball games.
In regards to the win-win situation, has the Justin Timberlake-Janet Jackson incident at the Super Bowl damaged that relationship?

From a TV perspective—or any of us that are in this business—everyone's going to try to be as careful as they can. But you're dealing with the human element so you can't control everything. An organization can do all the checks and balances possible and still isn't going to guarantee an incident won't occur.

So will it bring an air of questioning? Absolutely. Speaking specifically for the 76ers, we have a lot of families and young children attending our games, so we always take into consideration artists and acts and their reputations before considering them for a performance at a game. I think it opened everyone's eyes at least for the short-term.

As a sport organization, should the NFL feel as if it was taken advantage of? Are they saying, "You get to sell more records, but we are left with an angry fan base?"

I think that's what the NFL was saying, and I think that Janet Jackson tried to absolve them of blame. But again, that's a chance we all take when we are putting on live events. Janet Jackson had never done anything like that before in her career, so I would have felt comfortable having her perform at our game. There are other performers that are very edgy and I would not book them knowing my fan base, but there are chances in everything that we do. A lot of people are looking for that opportunity for guerrilla marketing. That's the price we pay for being such a high exposure vehicle, both the entertainment and sport industries. Our players on the floor each night are very emotional about the games. It's the human element that we can't control, but we try to be as careful as we can and try not to offend anyone.

What do you say to the person who feels there's too much entertainment at the game, the game is lost?

I would say that we have to provide a total entertainment experience for everyone. I would hope that while the game's going on we don't ruin the pure form of it. There are sound prompts, but a lot of that stuff is used to try to get the fans to be interactive with the team. There is a fine line. The purist may feel the game has completely changed, but we are a generation of instant gratification and constant stimulation.

In terms of it being too loud, we really do monitor that. The NBA has regulations on how loud our in-game music can be. During a timeout, people should be able to have a conversation, but the music is part of creating the fun atmosphere. If it's quiet, then no one's having a good time. On the reverse, it may be a little bit louder because the fans are into it.

Do you think there is a segment of your fan base that does not enjoy the entertainment aspect? Maybe some of your older fans or heavy users who tire of seeing the entertainment activities every game?

Maybe, but that goes back to my earlier statement. We know we can't please everyone, so we have to strive for the total entertainment experience. If the older fan base likes the game to be "pure" but brings children to the game and they have a great time, they usually go away happy with the overall experience. But I've watched a lot of adults go crazy for t-shirt shoots, coupons that drop from our blimp, and it's not the kids who are the problem. The adults are usually more aggressive. People love free stuff.

In recent years the 76ers have had the opportunity to do tributes (e.g., Charles Barkley and 1983 NBA Championship team). What is the key to doing a tribute well?

It is a total team effort. Someone starts with an idea and we go from there. For example, the '83 team celebration. There were the logistics of how the players were arriving to Philadelphia, who was picking them up, what gifts would we give to them. There is the conceptual aspect. For the '83 team tribute, we looked at what artists and songs were hot at the time. We came up with Irene Cara and her hit What a Feeling. So Dave Coskey got in touch with her agent, made the pitch, and she wanted to be a part of it. So we were able to have her as a surprise performer as part of the overall ceremony.

We also try to make sure each of these promotions and celebrations touch all aspects of the organization: How does it touch community relations, public relations, the fans? Can it help sell tickets? What type of giveaways can we provide so the fan can take away something that is nostalgic? How does it tie into the TV broadcast so fans at home can see? How do we get that 'Wow' feeling that brings chills? How do we surprise? How do we provide drama? How do we make it so that people are touched by the event? A lot of it comes from years of doing it and watching what others do.

With the music, are you going to another building and hearing a song and saying "Hey, the crowd really reacted to that in a positive sense, let's give it a shot" or is it something you hear on the radio driving in and say "I am going to use this tonight?"

It's all of those! I may hear a song in another building, but I know it won't work in Philadelphia. Utah's music is completely different than what you'd hear in New York or here. But that's the fan base and that's what's popular there.

Sometimes you try a song and you don't get a response, so you don't play that song again. You try old songs because everything's retro now. But you have to
ask "How do you use it in a game?" There's not one
recipe for how to do it. It's a combination of a lot of
people saying "Hey, did you hear this song? What do
you think? Would it work here? Could the dance team
dance to it? What about Hip-Hop, the mascot, using
this for his performance?

How much of the music is scripted? How much of it
spontaneous?

It's not scripted, but there's a limit to the spontaneity.
You develop a trust factor with the person playing the
music. The same gentleman who does music for us,
does it for the Flyers and Phillies. He has different play
lists for all of us. I actually used to sit at the table and
direct it. Now we have a person who suggests songs as
well as our music coordinator.

What about inappropriate music?

It depends on what you mean by inappropriate. I
have two definitions. One that is offensive verbally, or
two, music that is played at the inappropriate time. I've
sometimes asked during a game "Why are we playing
this song at this moment," and the response is "I
thought it would be hot." Music is such an individual
taste, that's what's very hard about it. Some people will
like it and some will not. When you're in charge you get
to say which pieces you like and don't like, but it's very
subjective. There are key songs all of us in sport use
because for whatever reason they have worked. Those
are the go-to songs. You try to develop new ones on
your own. An easy way to make a song work is to use
them in positive situations like with the Fan-Cam.
Marry the songs with positive things. Not negatives.
Don't try a new song when the team is down by 15.

How do you quantify the value of what you do for
the organization? What is the payback?

Season and individual ticket sales let us know if were
doing our job. A happy customer is a repeat customer.
If they are not happy or entertained, they're not going
to come. You can have a winning team and not do any-
ting, but there are other sports teams in town, and
people go to other events and see other things. There's
probably a fine line between spending too much
money, because we need to be conscious of our expen-
ditures, but I don't want to be cheap, either, because
fans notice that as well.

Our ticket base increased every year and stayed the
same in the last couple of years. So to me that means
we're doing something right. We don't make everyone
happy. There are the purists who would like us to just
play the basketball game and get rid of the bells and
whistles. Our feeling is people are paying a lot of
money to come see a professional basketball team so
we're trying to give them added value.

Interview conducted by Matthew Robinson, University
of Delaware