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Founder/President, CharitaBulls  
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The Bulls were able to maintain high attendance in the post-Michael Jordan Era. What were the keys to success?

There is no simple answer to this question. We have produced a 600-page marketing plan every year for the last 19 years, which cumulatively holds the answer. But in a nutshell, and oversimplified, our success was due to the efforts we made to grow new fans, identify those fans, and ask for the order. That, customer service, and wise ticket pricing policies have been the keys to our continued success.

During his playing days, did Jordan have an interest in the business side of an NBA franchise? If so how?

He demonstrated no interest that I saw during that period. He was primarily interested in the business of "Brand Jordan."

Another change you dealt with during your career was the move from historical Chicago Stadium to the United Center. Were customers more excited about the move to a new arena or saddened at leaving the venerable but outdated facility?

It was a mixture of the two—excitement and sadness.

Having gone through the aftermath of a work stoppage, what advice do you have for the NHL vice presidents of marketing?

Customer outreach. More than ever, let your fans and sponsors know that they are appreciated and not taken for granted. This not only applies to each franchise, but each player must reach out in the same way and be accessible and friendly and recognize their shared responsibility in this regard to help grow the sport. After all, they now get a percentage of the revenue the sport generates so they have more of an economic incentive than ever before to do this.

You have been with the Bulls for 19 years. What has changed over those years in how the Bulls and even the whole NBA markets itself?

The fundamentals of growing new fans, identifying and reaching out to those fans, and asking for the order I described above never change. In terms of how things are different today than they were 20 years ago, the continued fragmentation of TV viewership due to all the increased options is a big change. But it is the dawn of the Internet age, where every desktop computer is now a ticket outlet, and which gives us the ability to communicate instantly—in an unfiltered way—late-breaking news or important messages to our fans, would have to be the single biggest fundamental change. The emphasis on community service and game entertainment is greater than it was when I first got into the league. One scary thing for the sports marketer and sports team owners dependant upon selling season tickets successfully is the rise of companies like stub hub and ebay, which compete with the teams for selling tickets.

How important is the communication/collaboration among the NBA franchises and marketing leaders in the overall success of teams and the league?

It is very important to share best practices. Doing so leads to lots less trial and error.

What skills and or traits do you find your top sales people possess and why are they important to their success?

Relentless drive, energy and enthusiasm, good communication, and interpersonal skills. Passion for what they do. And the words "not interested" does not bother them—they are generally bulldogs who don’t take "no" personally. They just move on to the next prospect.

The Bulls have a very active community relations program. How are those activities integrated into your overall marketing efforts?

Well, research has shown that when people feel good about your company, they are generally more receptive than they would otherwise be when we come to call to try and sell them something. So we should do good in the community not only because it’s the right thing to do, but because it makes good business sense as well.

The NBA has been proactive globally in terms of the sale of licensed product, the sale of broadcast rights fees, and the playing of exhibition games oversees.
What do you think the next steps might be for the NBA globally?

Well, besides more of the same—just bigger, better, and more of it, the obvious answer to that question is adding teams from overseas. But I'm not sure how we would overcome the travel-related issues, or other issues such as those related to lifestyle and cultural and language differences or fluctuations in currency values.

What challenges and opportunities do the influx of foreign players into the league present in terms of marketing?

In terms of opportunities, this influx makes the NBA more of a global brand than it otherwise would be, and improves the quality of our game. Because now the pool of players we have to choose from is not just limited to one country in the world, but to the entire world itself. It assures that NBA basketball is the best basketball in the world because it features the world's best players. In terms of the challenges, overcoming the language barrier that exists in some cases would be the most important one.

In terms of marketing, what will be the impact of the new collective bargaining agreement that restricts high school player coming directly to the league?

This represents a great step forward for the NBA (and for the college game as well) because it ensures that players we bring into the league are a year more advanced emotionally, physically, and mentally than they would otherwise be. They are more mature, and more prepared to succeed and maximize their potential. Actually, I wish it was a bit longer period that they had to stay in school actually—like two or three years. Also, because of all the exposure the college game gets, it gives us ready-made stars to promote and build excitement around come draft day. Lots of these high school kids we've been drafting are very talented, but no one has ever seen many of them play, so it's hard to get too excited about them. Also, most of them sit on the bench and don't get any better doing that. They will be better off playing in college and learning the game from all the great college coaches.

Do you think the NBDL has the potential to be a true minor league for the franchises in the league and if so, can it achieve the marketing success that minor league baseball has experienced?

Yes I think it has that kind of potential.

David Stern is credited with leading the NBA to where it is today, one of the strongest sport leagues and brands in the world. Of all he has done, what has been his greatest contribution as NBA commissioner?

David is the best commissioner in the history of team sports in my view for the way he has turned around and reinvented the NBA brand. Many commissioners I have observed in the past sit on their throne and don't get their hands dirty. But David is a guy who rolls up his sleeves every day. No one in that office works harder than he does or cares more deeply and passionately about the brand. If I had to pick one, David's greatest contribution to the game among his many contributions would have to be the salary cap. It ensured the league's survival at a time the league was in deep peril.

Which would you prefer, the opportunity to market a franchise that has the greatest basketball player to ever play, Michael Jordan, or the challenge of marketing the franchise after that player retires?

I am both sad and glad to say that I have experienced both. I will take Michael any day!

Interview conducted by Matthew J. Robinson,
University of Delaware