You have been involved in sport marketing for over 20 years. What changes have you seen during that time?

The sophistication. When we started, we believed we could embellish certain sporting events, add to them, to enhance people's enjoyment. It was mostly "by the seat of the pants," although we planned as best we could. End users, clients, and large sponsors were certainly less sophisticated and were less demanding than they are today.

You've been involved with several different organizations at several different levels. Is there one that comes to mind with which you had the most enjoyment or success?

They're never the same. The most enjoyable time was in 1991 when we decided to start an independent minor baseball league, the Northern League. It opened in 1993 and we are now in our 10th year. I own a club in St. Paul and we've sold every ticket to every game for the last 8½ years and I still can't tell you why that is. When we opened in St. Paul, seven miles from the Metrodome, all the pundits predicted we would be out of business in 45 days. We sold $1.50 hotdogs and $2 beer in 1993, and we still sell $1.50 hotdogs and $2 beer. Years later, I think our success has come from demonstrating the balance between a town needing a club and a club obviously needing a town.

Is there something that the major leagues can learn from this type of success at the minor league level?

Yes. The major leagues need to understand that fans are not gross impressions. They're people. Minor leagues are based on customer service, because they build fan by fan. And the mantra in the major leagues is "sell a big deal." Customer service is not commensurate with the sheer size of the major league deals. If you make a $10,000 sale at the minor league level, in a lot of instances it can be a very important one. If you make a $100,000 sale at the major league level, that's a low to mid-level deal. In my opinion, they have not struck a balance of service to the price being paid. In the next 3-5 years, everybody at the major league level will be selling, but there will be no sales department. It will all be customer service—whether it's directed at clients or directed at fans who come in. There is still a prevalent mind set in the major leagues that if you put a good product out there, people are going to come, and sponsors are going to want to be associated with that winner, regardless of how they are treated.

It seems that promotions are the lifeblood of the minor leagues. How important is segmentation in promotions?

Terribly important. I just finished the first phase of a campaign for the Detroit Tigers. There is an ad promotion that is targeting single moms. There are ads targeting single dads and their kids. In my esti-

NAME: Michael Veeck

TITLE: Owner of a number of minor league and independent baseball teams

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS: Owner, Boston White Sox
Founder of Northern League
Vice president of marketing for Tampa Bay Devil Rays
Seasoned public speaker

In mation, segmenting is one of the most important elements of a promotional and advertising campaign, after getting "people" persons involved. A lot of times, people don't realize the importance. Last year for example, in Charleston, we stumbled on something that I think was really startling. We gave away a funeral. We figured it would get some attention and would offend some people and result in some conversation. Quite the reverse was true. People my age, 51 to 70, have become tremendously aware of the cost of burial or cremation. It was a resounding success with that segment. A person had to write, in 100 words or less, what his or her eulogy would be. The premise was they were 100 years old and had died in their sleep. We received an overwhelming number of entries. We were actually lauded for taking care of a particular market segment. I can assure you that was not the original intent. The winner was a young girl who entered for a patient
of hers at cancer hospice. It couldn't have been a better promotion for the funeral home that conducted it, for us, and for a segment of potential fans in the minor league business—empty nesters, which are very difficult to reach. We're constantly trying to segment and market to little niches.

What's the thought process behind a promotion? And how do you choose a sponsor for a promotion?

Normally, we generate an idea first. Then we look over our list of people we're doing business with, or at potential partners. I like to use a new promotion when going after new business. But it is possible to develop a promotion based on applicability to a client. It just happens to work in reverse. I think the proper way to do it is to call on a client and listen. Don't tell them what they need—offer how you can help drive traffic. Forget the days of just putting up a sign and telling them it'll be warm and fuzzy and it will make them feel great.

What's the risk/reward associated with a promotion? For example, the Disco Demolition night promotion with the White Sox in the late 1970s? In your father's book Veeck as in Wreck, it is referred to as one of the great promotions and also one of the ones that maybe got away.

That's a perfect example. I was 28 years old and there was a definite generation gap between the kids attracted to the promotion and me. I miscalculated. There was real heat on the street about that promotion. I didn't have any idea of the consequences.

But you sold out the house.

Yes. There were 100,000 people who wanted in. People said we knew it was going to happen. That's poppycock. If we could bottle it, that, then we would. I didn't realize there was going to be that kind of reaction. Going back to an earlier question, minor league baseball, while being an important element in each of its respective communities, does not get an overwhelming amount of coverage on the national level. So a great number of our promotions, and I do admit we go after it a bit differently, are to generate national attention. In my experience, people like to be associated with a group that Rolling Stone is writing about or Sports Illustrated is saying, "Isn't this silly?" It also is a survival technique. I've operated personally in a number of markets that quite frankly aren't interested in minor league baseball or whether I'm there. So we get a little national attention and suddenly the local guys pay a little more attention. So I just think it's good marketing.

Whether it is good attention or bad attention, any attention is good.

No, I'm not a believer in that. My dad and I used to have tremendous arguments about that. During Bob Dylan's resurgence, he could care less whether he was well thought of. I used to argue it doesn't matter what kind of attention it was, but ultimately it does matter. It doesn't matter if you do something that you believe in. I got a lot of bad press when I signed Darryl Strawberry. I got a lot of bad press when I signed the first blind announcer. I'm not sorry. I'm proud of those things. There are things that you have to take chances on if they're things that you believe. It isn't always about beliefs. I didn't give away a funeral because it had any great belief. I admit I was trying to get attention. But the fact is, death is very much a part of the human condition. And the fact that it makes people uncomfortable to discuss it isn't lost on me. The best promotions make people think. They don't just make money.

But do promotions really increase attendance or is it just for the attention?

I had been out of the major league level for twenty years before I went to Tampa Bay, and I was accused of using cheap theatrics, which I almost wear like a halo, if you will, just for attention. I finally had enough when a fellow said to me, "Prove to me these promotions actually work." So I showed him that on a Friday night against the Yankees, at the end of the season we had 25,000 and on Sunday we had 25,000. On Saturday night we had 37,000 because we had a scout sleepover promotion. There were 10,000 boy scouts who were able to sleep out on the field. For an increase of 10,000 I would do almost anything. And I could care less what the traditionalists say. It's exposing 10,000 more people to the experience we are offering. Forget the money.

Is increasing the number of people exposed to your product the only way to judge a promotion?

No, the number one thing is if people enjoy it. The only yardstick I utilize is if it makes people laugh. If I develop a promotion and the idea makes me laugh, then there's probably a good chance others will also enjoy it. So the foremost thing is to make it enjoyable. Laughter is in short supply in our society. For example, the lowest attendance record in minor league baseball is 1 person to see the Portland Beavers in the 1930s. So, we're going to have a game here in Charleston this year and not let anybody in until the 5th inning. Why would anybody want that dubious distinction? Why not?

With the lineage from your father to your grandfather, did it ever enter your mind not to be involved in sports?

I never wanted any part of this. Nobody wants to be the son of a legend. I went to Loyola College in

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1Disco Demolition night was a promotion held by the White Sox franchise in 1979. It entailed spectators bringing disco records to the stadium for reduced admission. Those records would be blown up during the break between the games of the double header. The promotion was a success. The park was sold out and many more fans could not get in, but the blowing up of the records led to the fans storming the field and cancellation of the second game of the double header.
Baltimore. I played music on the road the day I got out of school and did that for three years. One day my dad said he was going to buy the White Sox and asked if I would come to work with him. I was basically estranged from him and thought it would be kind of cool to see what he does. So I told him I'd stay two years—and I stayed 6½ years and I've never had so much fun. It saved my relationship with my father. In my head, it’s been less about baseball and more about connecting. I do what I do because it connects me to my grandfather and my father. I’m passionate about it because it continues the chain and I find a great deal of reassurance in a world I can’t really understand. I have no problem competing with my dad because my dad was a visionary. I’m just a guy who makes his living doing what he loves and who feels a tremendous return from being able to follow in his footsteps. That’s singular by the way. There will only be one Bill Veeck and that makes is very easy to be his kid. Being a Kennedy was probably tougher. But being a Veeck was pretty easy.

It seemed as if your father viewed baseball from the perspective of the common man.

My father never felt he was any better than anyone because he owned a club. Maybe it was because the banks always owned a great deal of the clubs he owned and maybe it was because he wasn’t independently wealthy. I don’t know. But he always had a deep mistrust of the inner workings of baseball and a great deal of trust in fans. My dad never bowed or pandered to fans. He did what they wanted because he really believed in his heart that they knew more about operating his club than he did. People went to the ballpark to hang out with my dad. You can’t say that about very many owners.

We invented the skybox in 1978, but my father was against them. The Chicago Cardinals press box was hanging empty at Comisky Park, so we put it up for sale. It sold out in three days. We took in $70,000, but my dad was furious. He said, “I bet you think the VFW’s going to use this,” and I said, “well, as a matter of fact, the VFW has rented it.” He told me companies will eventually grab it and it will become an elitist tool and I was a moron. He was right.

Your father was doing things in the ’40s that are viewed as cutting edge today. Do you think your father gets the credit he deserves for being such a visionary?

He mostly gets credit for the midget. My dad never gets credit for being the visionary that he was. He gets credit for gags. What gets forgotten is that he suggested interleague play; he suggested 50 years ago, when he had the Browns and Topping & Webb had the Yankees, that they share electronic revenue. He testified on behalf of Curt Flood in the reserve clause case. In 1942, he attempted to buy the Philadelphia Phillies and fill the roster with players from the Negro league. My favorite thing he gets credit for is the exploding scoreboard. The exploding scoreboard was inspired by a play by William Saroyan called the Time of Your Life. And in the last scene, in a saloon, there’s a drifter, a hard luck guy who we all identify with. We all like to win, but we don’t very often. The character hits the jackpot on a gaming machine and in those days the bartender paid the jackpot off in cash. My dad’s watching this play with my mom and he’s looking around and everybody’s eyes are glued to the stage as this machine explodes and lights are flashing and music’s going . . . and that was the inspiration to building the exploding scoreboard.

Thanks, Mike, for your time.

Interview conducted by SMQ
Section Editor Matthew Robinson.