Baseball Marketing: Back to the Minors

Colby B. Jubenville, Benjamin D. Goss, Brad Ledford

Introduction

The State of Baseball

Amid economic downturns, escalating costs, possible franchise contractions, and economic disparity among franchises, major league baseball is battling to manage the ever-changing media models for marketing via television and the World Wide Web while simultaneously stabilizing its fan base. Such a challenge was successfully survived decades ago by minor league baseball teams, who confronted similar challenges with the advent of televised baseball by offering fans unparalleled accessibility, adoptability, affordability, and individuality (Gorn & Goldstein, 1993; Rader, 1999; Williams, 2001).

Conversely, minor league baseball has arguably never enjoyed greater success. For the sixteenth time in 19 seasons, minor league attendance increased from the previous season, with 37.7 million fans attending 176 minor league parks in 2000 (Williams, 2001). Additional favorable indicators for minor league baseball include soaring franchise price tags, new multimillion-dollar stadiums, and licensing-related revenues topping $30 million annually (Williams, 2001). Consequently, for those seeking to market the major league game, going back to the minors may offer solid foundations for successful marketing.

Marketing Principles

This paper focuses on seven principles that have allowed minor league baseball franchises to establish solid fan bases through sound marketing plans combining basic sport marketing fundamentals with contemporary approaches. Examples executed by the Lexington (KY) Legends Class A franchise will illustrate each criterion.

Molding the Mission

A clear organizational mission statement orients marketing efforts in one direction by clarifying management's marketing goals using broad, general statements to delineate the franchise's purpose and current situation (Pitts & Stotlar, 1996; Sawyer & Smith, 1999). These mission-related efforts center around adoptability, or making the team an integral part of the community; entertainment, or ensuring customers' satisfaction with their ballpark experience; and profitability, or ensuring franchise survival (A. Stein, personal communication, February 16, 2001). Molded around such missions, ensuing marketing concepts aid organizations in establishing products that are easily integrated, consumed, and marketed (Pitts & Stotlar, 1996).

According to Lexington Legends founder and President Alan Stein, the franchise's mission is "to provide entertainment for the community, to bring baseball back to Lexington, and to have fun." While elements of management and profitability remain within sport franchises like any enterprise (Minter, 1998; Coakley, 2001), Stein noted, "We realize that not only are we in the baseball business but in the entertainment business by giving them that warm feeling from not only seeing a baseball game, but laughing and enjoying a Saturday or Sunday afternoon."

Creating larger awareness of the organization's mission proves as vital as formulating effective mission statements (Sawyer & Smith, 1999). Lexington's methodical mission to create a quality fan experience would have proven futile if not for a year-long campaign preceding their normal preseason marketing efforts that clearly and publicly communicated the intent of Legends management to provide a baseball-centered, amenity-laden entertainment experience.

Implementing Grassroots MIS

Pitts and Stotlar (1996) define management information systems (MIS) as "a collection of data utilized by management in operation and development of marketing programs and market-related decisions." Such strategies dictate systematic approaches to marketing, typically through one or both of two methods: primary research, or research conducted via surveys, telephone interviews, and personal interviews; and secondary research, or research collected by outside marketing agencies and presented to hiring organizations in usable formats (Pitts & Stotlar, 1996).

However, some minor league franchises are discovering less formal MIS approaches through grassroots marketing, which are efforts with long-range orientation designed to build enthusiasm for a product, service, or organization over time. Such attempts seek to create long-term growth by cultivating interest among potential customers possessing qualities, abilities, and potential to become future consumers. With such a strategy, organizations rely upon collected data more for informative purposes than for decisive purposes (Sutton & McDonald, 1998).
Stein utilized this grassroots MIS approach with a three-question interview at minor league parks to determine reasons why minor league consumers might attend a game. He inquired if fans had fun; if they would come back; and which team won. Stein found that customers who had fun almost always indicated an interest in returning for future games, even if they had no idea which team won. This discovery helped the Legends identify a core fan base whose members would attend the game strictly to watch baseball. Secure in this demographic knowledge, the Legends could then direct marketing efforts toward consumers oriented to general entertainment pursuits.

Making Fans from Citizens

Community involvement is key to successful minor league marketing campaigns, since their primary task is to make fans from general-entertainment consumers. Activities/programs attempting to meet public interests are staged by sport organizations to establish good-faith relationships, which will often lead to abandoning traditional target markets (Blann, 1998).

Before the franchise landed in Lexington in 2000, three previous attempts failed, mostly due to public disapproval for public financing, despite heavy political backing. Ironically, a 1997 poll surveying 500 Lexington residents indicated that 46% of individuals surveyed wanted baseball in Lexington, though 47% did not want to see $10 million in public money spent to build a stadium (Lasserter, 2001a; Lasserter, 2001b). Consequently, the Legends deemed it futile to market with demographic-specific methods.

In addition to prototypical grassroots programs like youth sports clinics and autograph sessions, the Legends expand their marketing efforts by establishing their franchise as a good citizen within Lexington's community, availing Applebee's Park to charitable organizations for various events, or providing staff members for community projects.

Entertaining the Customer

Like optimal placement, exceptional entertainment will never become outdated. This goal typically ignites efforts of most minor league teams to create an environment of total pleasure. As lines between sport and entertainment blur, franchises search for methods to infuse their products with added value, including fireworks, t-shirt shoots, unique food/beverage menus, laser-light shows, blimp drops, sponsor giveaways, and zany non-game events, all in concerted efforts to turn games into event experiences (Hruby, 2001).

During the 2002 season, the Legends staff oversaw what was billed as the first ballpark wedding of its kind. The couple was married on the pitcher's mound one June Saturday before the Legends played the Macon Braves. Attired in formal gowns and tuxedos, the wedding party, including tails-sporting Legends mascot Big L, encircled the mound. Wedding guests surrounded the infield, while early-arriving fans watched from the stands. During the reception, held in the Pepsi Party Deck and broadcast on the videoboard, the couple, minister, and witnesses signed the marriage license, thereby completing what the Legends staff thinks was the first wedding to be made entirely official at a ballpark.

Taking the Game Home

Despite focus toward on-site entertainment, minor league teams remain cognizant of product extension opportunities other than typical external extension items consumed and/or transported from ballparks by customers, like pennants, caps, jerseys, baseball cards, etc. Effective extension also includes internal extensions, like hot tubs, kids' zones, and specialty restaurants; and cyber-extensions delivering cutting-edge approaches, especially through the dimension of interactivity offered by the World Wide Web.

Attractions throughout Applebee's Park include Maker's Mark Super Club stadium restaurant; Kentucky Barbeque pre-game buffet and picnic area down the left-field line; a children's playground with carousel and speed-pitch attractions; Budweiser Stables indoor/outdoor group party area behind the Legends' bullpen; and the Pepsi Party Deck, a group picnic/party area and pre-game buffets.

Gone are Websites that merely provide the previous day's box scores and rudimentary designs (Sweet, 2001). Without effective World Wide Web presences, minor league teams cannot offer ultimate sponsorship packages, achieve maximum product extension, satisfy many existing fans, or recruit potential customers effectively. Accordingly, fans can interact with virtually every element of the Legends experience through the franchise's Web site, including a live Web-cam, radio broadcasts, a virtual stadium tour, information archives, merchandise shopping, and ticket purchases, framed by links to corporate sponsors' Web pages.

Likewise vital to revenue streams is off-site product extension. Team stores carrying franchise merchandise may be found in non-ballpark locations like shopping malls, airports, and restaurants. While the Lexington franchise operates an Applebee's Park store with regular business hours year-round, they also operate a Legends Locker store in a Lexington mall.

A constant thread in the fabric of the national pastime, the medium of radio still packs a tremendous punch in the function of minor league baseball. Unlike major league teams' multimillion dollar broadcast
rights, minor league franchises pay stations for air time, then re-sell it proportionally, typically to corporate sponsors, but sometimes back to the station or network as part of sponsorship packages (Rader, 1999; Miller, 2001).

Radio provides numerous franchise benefits by generating higher corporate sponsor revenues, sufficing as a medium of exchange for goods and/or services, and helping provide a one-stop sponsorship integrated with some combination of telecasts, Webcasts, newsletter space, stadium signage, and hospitality (Miller, 2001). Most importantly, radio establishes franchise legitimacy and provides a three-hour product promotion (Miller, 2001).

Lexington has sought to maximize its presence throughout Kentucky with a 20-station radio network, the largest network in the minors.

**Linking Ownership and Loyalty**

Successful entertainment culminates in fan empowerment by linking loyalty and ownership. Consistency and reliability of products produce greater customer appreciation for products and franchises. Eventually, consumers build trust and familiarity with franchises’ products, leading to loyalty, which, with sustained appreciation, influences consumers to internalize products. Accordingly, a sense of product ownership ensues, leading to empowerment, because products have completely satisfied consumer needs.

The Lexington franchise wanted to capitalize on feelings of ownership and loyalty long before the team took the field. To initiate this effort, they invited the public to submit nicknames for the team, and season ticket holders narrowed the submissions to ten possible nicknames. Subsequently, the nickname *Legends* was chosen to create the effect of an established product that had new sprouts but deep roots in Lexington.

However, this effort did not stop once the nickname was chosen. The excitement peaked with a mascot unveiling extravaganza in downtown Lexington. Thousands of fans and every area media outlet flooded the streets, and merchandise and ticket sales far exceeded expectations as fans clamored to adopt the Legends as part of Lexington folklore.

**Improving the Quality of Life**

The ultimate outcome of effective baseball marketing is an improved quality of life for the community. Baseball as a social facilitator and affordable entertainment option is as vital to the post-modern socio-economic system as it was to the antebellum era of America (Gorn & Goldstein, 1993). Franchises take drastic measures to offer a more personalized, fan-oriented experience at a reasonable price (Williams, 2001). Minor league baseball can also be directly or indirectly linked to revitalization of districts surrounding ballparks, producing assets enhancing the entire community (Rowan, 2001).

Recognizing that sport is a distinctive social activity that frequently forms the basis for one’s social identity (McPherson, Curtis, & Loy, 1989), the entire social facilitation process, not baseball alone, was Stein’s vision when he established the Legends franchise. Applebee’s Park was built to accommodate year-round gatherings of individual fans, small groups, and large parties in a plethora of entertainment environments. Such a phenomenon has energized a shunned, economically slumping area that was home only to an empty field proximal to a strip mall containing a Chinese restaurant, coin laundry, bingo parlor, and budget grocery store (Lasseter, 2001a; Reed, 2001).

**Conclusions**

Minor league baseball continually proves that nothing is wrong with professional baseball when properly marketed and managed. Though some spectators may perceive the minor leagues and their nostalgic yards as heartwarming re-immersions in the pleasures of a pastoral game, the attraction for most fans lies in the value that can be obtained for their dollar: inexpensive tickets, cheap hot dogs, promotional giveaways, and non-stop entertainment between innings (Rowan, 2001).

However, such an attraction is far from automatic. Carefully calculated marketing plans with customer-centered outcomes ensure franchises’ success in becoming vital parts of the entertainment landscapes of their communities, thereby adding to their areas’ quality of life.

As for the Lexington Legends, they appear to be well on their way to establishing themselves as a permanent Lexington fixture with a simple concept of baseball-centered entertainment with ties to history and visions for the future.

**References**


Call for Papers

Sport Marketing Quarterly Special Issues on “Race and Ethnicity”

Nature of Special Issue

The special issue of Sport Marketing Quarterly is on Race and Ethnicity. One of the most critical issues facing marketers today is how to respond to consumer diversity. Psychological, sociological, and economic fundamentals of race and ethnicity undoubtedly exert a profound influence on individuals’ interest and involvement in sport, as well as their overall attitudes and behaviors regarding sport and leisure pursuits. As such, there is a grave need to increase sport marketers’ overall understanding of the dynamics of facilitating the sport exchange in a manner that is sensitive to and reflective of the racially and ethnically diverse “community” of sport consumers.

The overall goal of the special issue is to illuminate the unique sport experiences of racially and ethnically diverse sport consumers. The special issue seeks to: (a) provide a collection of research on or related to aspects of race and ethnicity to advance the sport marketing academy (and subsequently sport marketing practice) and (b) serve as a basis for future research on race and ethnicity and sport consumption.

Submission Deadline:

All manuscripts must be received by June 15, 2004.

Manuscript Guidelines:

All manuscripts will be peer reviewed. Manuscripts should follow the guidelines in the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (5th Ed.) and should be prepared in accordance with the “Format and Style” instructions found in published editions of Sport Marketing Quarterly.

Guest Editor

The original manuscript should be submitted via Email to the guest editor:
Dr. Ketra L. Armstrong
Program Director, Sport Management
Department of Kinesiology & Physical Education
California State University, Long Beach
1250 Bellflower Blvd.
Long Beach, CA 90840-4901
Phone: (562) 985.4025; Fax: (562) 985.8067
Email: karmstr2@csub.edu