

Combine puts sales skills to true test

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They hate me.

The couple who came rushing through the entry doors, hand-in-hand, and blew by, hurrying to make it to their seats in time for tip-off. The father trying to calm a budding dispute between two sons sharing a new foam finger. The 20-something single who finds herself separated from her friends because she wants a cocktail, and for that she must wait in a longer line.

They all hate me. And I can't say I blame them. I'm an overdressed stranger with a clipboard and a name tag, bothering them at a basketball game. I hate me, too.



Bill King

But here I am, lurking between a busy, interminably slow, concession stand and a popular set of rest rooms, clipboard in hand. I will introduce myself as Bill King, a representative of the Orlando Magic. I will tell them I am here tonight conducting market research, gathering information about fans and their experiences.

That, of course, is not true.

I am here to try to do what most other strangers who approach them uninvited try to do: sell them something. In this case, it's a Magic season ticket. But it could just as easily be a gently driven Nissan or a share in a Marriott vacation club.

Answer a few questions, tell me a little bit about yourself and what you like about coming to Magic games, and I will register you in a drawing to win two tickets to a future game. All you have to do is give me your name, and your phone number, and an e-mail address.

Most sports fans are suckers for anything free — tickets, T-shirts, rat poison, anything — so they answer the questions and write down their names.

But they hate me.

They will hate me even more tomorrow morning, when I call them at home.

Ticketing tryouts

They call it the combine, but there are no stop watches, weight benches or whistles here. This is not a place to scout players. It is, however, a place to scout talent.



Last month in Orlando, two sports marketing professors, Bill Sutton of the University of Central Florida and Dick Irwin of the University of Memphis, convened the third in a series of job-finding events dubbed sports sales combines. At this one, 32 recent graduates and hopeful career changers gathered for two days of training and tryouts.

Sutton and Irwin landed on the term “combine” because they also bring in ticket sales executives from pro teams to coach and evaluate the attendees and then hire those who impress them. Just as the NFL uses its combine to put prospects through their paces, the sales combine drills prospective ticket sellers, allowing those doing the hiring to watch them under fire. The sales combine they held at Madison Square Garden in January led to jobs for 14 people.

The Orlando event began on a Friday morning at the suite level in Amway Arena, with introductions and an overview, punctuated by the reminder that the host Magic and the other six organizations that sent representatives — the Phoenix Suns, Atlanta Hawks and Thrashers, Memphis Grizzlies, New Orleans Hornets and Tampa Bay Rays — all were there in search of talent.

The morning and afternoon were dedicated to training and role-playing. All of it was geared to prepare the group for two lengthy tryouts that would test their skills.

On Friday night, the group would be turned loose on the concourse before and during a Magic game. Armed with clipboards, they would approach fans under the guise of collecting market research, with the underlying purpose of generating leads.

On Saturday, they would gather at the Magic offices, where they would spend most of the morning and afternoon on the phone, contacting prospects they spoke to at the game and others taken from lists compiled by the team.

The goal was to secure deposits that would grant priority to buy seats in the new arena the Magic will move into next season: \$200 per seat for a full season, \$100 for a partial.

“This is an audition,” Irwin told the group during his morning greeting. “This is a chance to perform. You’ve got 48 hours to show what you can do.”

Some took to the concourse better than others.

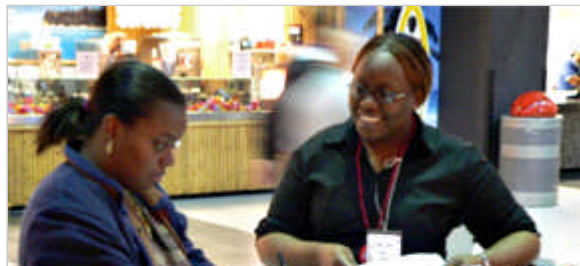

A former Florida A&M football player, Roger Dowdell, landed on the idea of grabbing fans from the concourse and inviting them down to courtside to watch warm-ups. “I walked people down with their kids and they felt like I was giving them something special,” Dowdell said. “Then, I had a chance to get to know them a little bit.”

That tactic brought Dowdell a quick payoff. He was the only one to return to suite level at night’s end

If yes, "Thank you, we truly appreciate your support..."
If no, "Great, in less than 5 minutes I'd like to learn about your support of the Orlando Magic."
Continue below...

1. What type of ticket are you using for today's game?
 Single Game Ticket Group Ticket Gift/Somewhere else's Season Ticket
2. During a typical season, how many Magic games do you attend? _____
3. Who do you attend Magic games with? Mark all that apply.
 Family/Friends (if _____) By myself
 Business associates/customers Groups - If so what kind: _____
3. What is most important when deciding to attend a game? Mark all that apply.
 Opponent Diverse/ly team Team Performance
 Day of the week Special Discounts Special Event
4. How many additional Magic games do you plan to attend this season? _____
5. How excited are you about the new, state-of-the-art, Amway Center opening in October 2010?
 Very Excited Moderately Excited Indifferent
6. How games do you anticipate attending in the new building?
 0-4 5-9 10-20 21+

Additional comments: _____
To be entered into a drawing to receive two (2) tickets to an upcoming Magic game please provide contact information below:
Name: _____
Address: _____
Phone: _____
Email: _____



with a deposit check in hand.

The two who collected the most surveys, Chris Hong and Jonathan Colen, came to the combine from disparate backgrounds. Colen graduated from UCF in 2008 with a sociology degree and was tending bar in Orlando. Hong graduated from the University of California, Irvine, and spent the last seven years in Shanghai, working in sales and marketing at his father's bamboo export business.



Both had success in part because they went beyond the bounds of the concourse.

"I started to notice that the people waiting in line for drinks weren't really willing to hear what I had to say," Colen said. "But outside in the smokers lounge, they were congregating and you knew you had a guaranteed four minutes with them. So I sacrificed my lungs and went out there with them."

The next day, Colen and Hong would find that their efforts had paid off.

Selling good times

In his presentation to the group, Sutton explained the difference between selling tickets and selling most other goods and services.

"We sell good times," Sutton said, scanning the room. "How many good times would you like to have this year?"

It resonated with me. You see, in my life outside journalism, I'm an NBA customer, sharing season tickets with two other couples. When my wife calls me on my cell phone, the photo that comes up is of her with our two sons in our seats. When the sales trainers in Orlando talked about positioning the tickets as a way for families to make memories together, I nodded and nearly teared up.

All I had to find on that concourse was another sentimental sap like me.

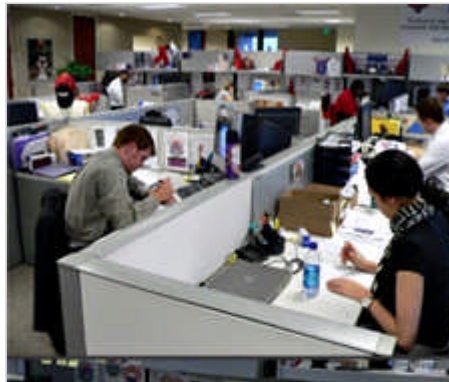
I talked to a handful of fans, asking questions and taking notes. I disposed of most of them. They weren't good prospects, and I really wasn't here to sell anyone tickets, anyway. I was here to learn and find a story.

Still, I found one lead I felt good about. Good enough to hang on to his prospect sheet.

He was standing outside the ladies room with his two daughters, waiting for his wife. When I introduced myself and asked if he would answer a few questions, he smiled like I'd thrown him a lifeline.

He said he loved basketball and liked the Magic, and so did his daughters. He traveled a lot, and a game was a good way for them to spend time together. They went three or four times a year, usually with a group. In fact, one of his daughters was part of a church group that was singing that night. The seats, he said, were lousy.

I knew how he could get better seats.



Closing the deal

They gathered in a conference room at the Magic offices at 9 a.m. the next morning, then spent about an hour listening to coaching tips and role-playing. Shortly before 10, they moved to the sales area.

Even spread out across the many cubicles of the Magic offices, the combined voices of 32 people, dialing and pitching at once, produced a white noise that ranged from din to cacophony.

You know how you hear all that chatter in the background when a telemarketer calls to sell you a vacation club membership? This was the other end of that call.

"I know, I know. Going into the third it was looking. ... Right. Me, too. Hey, I was just calling to touch base with you on what we talked about last night, to see if you'd be interested in getting a package going."

From a few seats over, there was this:

"Are you familiar with our partial plans? Well, a partial is more dedicated to your preferences. It's going to be the Jim plan, rather than every single game."

Around the corner, this:

"If you wanted to go lower bowl, those tickets start as low as \$40 for the lower bowl and go up to \$295 if you want to sit right behind Dwight and give him a pat on the shoulder. ... But, again, the lower bowls are getting taken up pretty fast. And that's why we're calling on a Saturday."

In the next section over, this:

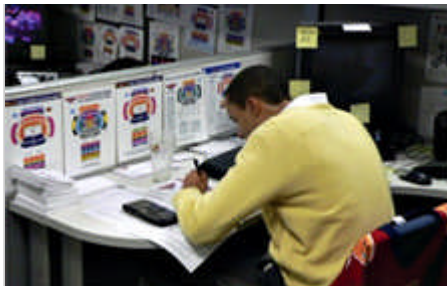
"You don't live here anymore? Ohhh. Where'd you move to? Well, I apologize. It's early there. I apologize and, uhh, you should go back to sleep."

As they made their pitches, a dozen coaches worked the floor, listening, critiquing and passing along tips.

When the Memphis Grizzlies' director of ticket sales and services, Brian Lowe, heard Dowdell let a prospect off the phone because she said she needed to talk it over with her husband, he used the moment as an opportunity to teach.

"It's great that you got a specific time to call back," Lowe said. "But, remember, sometimes people will think about it and discuss it and they start to reconsider and the momentum wears off. So press 'em a little. Say, 'I can call you back. But remember, I've got 15 other people sitting around me that are collecting deposits left and right. I'm sorry if I'm pushing you, but I don't want to see you get shut out.' You do that and she may not want to wait until 3 o'clock."

As Dowdell listened, he couldn't help looking past Lowe, where the Magic had set up a two-foot-high gong. Each time someone collected a deposit, they got to ring the gong. "I was the only one that got one last night, but that was last night," Dowdell said. "I want one now. I see these other people ringing that bell, and I want to ring the bell. It's frustrating."



Sales skills are put to the test in the war room as students call back fans. Instructors walk through the room and offer suggestions that could help complete sales.

The first to bang the gong was Colen, who cashed in on a conversation he had while mingling with the smokers. One in particular seemed excited. He said he went to about a dozen games a year anyway. By the next morning, he was ready to sign on for two full-season tickets.

There was a bump along the way. When Colen turned the call over to a Magic account executive, it turned out his prospect didn't have a credit card. The alternative was to come to the Magic offices with cash. It sounded as if Colen had been gamed, but within an hour his prospect had called back and offered up a credit card number.

Colen banged the gong, and the room erupted in applause.

I'm no salesman

Confession time.

I have never sold anything. Not even a bar of chocolate.

As a child, when I had to sell candy as a fundraiser for Cub Scouts or a basketball team or our school, I loaded my sheet up with family members and their friends. I've never worked at a fast-food counter or at the mall; never been paid to do anything other than write and edit stories.

So while the idea of striking up a conversation with a stranger is second nature to me as a reporter, and the notion of a person hanging up on me when I reach them at home is certainly not a foreign one, I'm struggling to come to terms with the part where I'm supposed to ask for money.

That is a call I do not want to make.

When we got to the Magic offices on Saturday morning, I made a sweep of all the cubicles, checking to see where some of the people I wanted to keep an eye on would be sitting. The Magic staff had placed name tags on the desks to help them find their spots.

I found Hong's. And Colen's. And Dowdell's. Then, at the end of a row, I came upon a name that I wasn't expecting.

Mine.

I had been assigned a desk and a phone, the assumption being that I would use them to try to sell tickets. I pulled the sheet with my prospect's info from my bag, placed it next to the phone, and went off to see how the others were doing. Each time I passed the cubicle, I thought about making the call. Each time, I decided, later.

Soon. But not now.

You're hired

Jack Lensky is "a beast."

This is how Sutton described Lensky when he introduced him, first to the other coaches and then to the attendees. Lensky smiled the first time he heard it, his hands adjusting the lapels on a navy suit jacket. Approaching his 20th year selling season tickets, first for the New Jersey Nets and now for the Magic, Lensky has made a career out of a job that spits out five out of every six people who try it.

This season, he eclipsed \$1.5 million in sales.

While many view ticket sales as an entry-level position, the best of the reps can make an enduring career of it. The worst of them — frequently those who want to work elsewhere at a team and are told sales is the way to get in — are quickly shown the door.

Joe Andrade, senior director of ticket sales for the Magic, got his start in the phone room of the Tampa Bay Rays. A graduate of the sports management program at the University of Massachusetts, Andrade went to St. Pete with the understanding that only three of the 12 trainees the team hired would be retained after eight months. He was No. 2.

“That was the traditional way of doing it, but I’m not sure it’s the right way,” Andrade said. “I’ve been through it, so I can empathize. I understand the fear factor that, on that date, I’m either packing up my bags or I’ve got to find a home. We don’t do that to our folks.”

Instead, the Magic keep a stable of 10 ticket sales representatives, all of whom receive benefits. They also have eight account executives, six of whom have more than five years of experience, along with six account execs who specialize in groups and one who specializes in tourism. They’re led by a director and two sales managers.

The ticket sales reps provide a feeder system. Those who sell best become account execs, typically within 18 months. Some move to customer service. Those who find themselves at the same desk after 18 months typically move on before they’re asked to move out.

Because so many see ticket sales as the only way into a franchise, the competition for slots is fierce. At the Phoenix Suns, 13 of the 14 sales reps came from outside Arizona.

The starting pay is low and the odds are long. A typical first year in ticket sales brings base compensation of \$18,000 to \$24,000 and commissions ranging from \$4,000 to \$8,000. Though structures vary, commissions typically range from 5 to 10 percent. Those who make it through will earn \$35,000 to \$50,000 in their second year and upward of \$75,000 in their third. Those who succeed long-term can knock down \$100,000 to \$150,000 annually at some franchises.

By year five, most reach a fork. They can move into management, where total compensation may be lower but the long-term career path is more stable. They can move into corporate or premium sales, where the perks are better and there is greater potential to close larger deals. Or they can continue to build on their book of business selling tickets.

“Some people take to it and love that they can keep earning without a cap,” Sutton said. “They want to be Jack Lensky.”

For most of the job seekers, the climax of the combine came on Saturday, when they were summoned to a small conference room where Sutton conducted short job interviews. Scouts from each team were invited to come and go. When Hong interviewed, there were more scouts than chairs.

He first caught their eye when he came back from the concourse with the most completed surveys. As they watched him work the phones on Saturday, they became more interested. When he told his story



The culminating event is a chance to interview for jobs. Here, Bill Fagan (right) from The Aspire Group interviews Tom Bell from Chicago at a combine held in New York City.

they watched him work the phones on Saturday, they became more interested. When he told his story in the interview, they fell hard.

Raised and educated in both Shanghai and California, Hong returned to his native country seven years ago to work in his father's bamboo export business. Since most of his clients were in Europe, his work was typically split into two stages — a typical day spent in the office, followed by a long night at work from home, dealing with clients in time zones six to eight hours behind China.

He had success in his father's business, but he wanted to return to the U.S. and longed to work in sports. He said he wanted to make his own way, rather than follow his father, and he wanted a job he would love. He quoted Buddhist philosophy, which teaches that you get back what you put in.

"Best we've ever had," Sutton said when Hong left the room.

Hong attracted interest from every team at the combine and received offers from four of them: the Magic, Hornets, Suns and Hawks/Thrashers. He wanted to learn more about some of them before making a decision. So he drove from Virginia Beach, where he and his wife were squatting at an aunt's condo, to Atlanta and then Phoenix. He chose Atlanta.

A month after the Orlando combine, two others also had been hired: Colen by the Magic and Oliver Gray by the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, who missed the combine but heard about Gray, who had 14 years of sales experience, most recently with Verizon.

As a group, the combine participants collected 33 deposits — 29 for partial plans and four for fulls.

"If you come to the combine and find one of those (like Hong), it's worth it," said Nick Forro, a combine coach who is manager of new business development for the Suns. "We're all looking for talent. We'll go wherever it takes to find someone who is going to be great."

Failing to connect

Early in the afternoon, Forro explained that some of his best scouting would come late in the day, when he watched to see which of the trainees wilted.

"That's why the combine is so much better than a regular job interview," Forro said. "Anybody can look good on paper and present themselves well. We all get fooled on occasion. But when you can see them in the trenches, on the phones, and see how they represent themselves — that's huge.

"Come 3 o'clock, are they going to keep dialing, or are they going to be allergic to the phones?"

It was closing in on 3:30, and I needed an antihistamine. If I was going to make my phone call, I had to do it now.

I looked at my sheet, reached for the phone and then stopped. I looked at my watch. I had a plane to catch. Yeah, that's it. A plane to catch. I'd run out of time.

I wanted to make sure my prospect was in good hands, so I gave my sheet to Brian Kamuda, one of the Magic's more successful account executives. "It's a good lead," I told him, adding a few notes that might help him strike up a connection. "Really, you should take a shot at him. I think he'll buy." Kamuda, who is closing in on \$1 million in sales this season, smiled generously. He put a hand on my shoulder and said he would.

Later that week, I followed up to see how things had gone with my prospect.

They called the number. It was disconnected.