

Sutton Impact

Sports organizations can 'do a Domino's' to reach out to fans

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**BILL
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In case you haven't seen it, Domino's Pizza has been running an ad campaign that shows the negative comments made by focus group participants and how Domino's has taken that feedback, improved its product and is now making that story public.

Jeff Steinhour, managing partner of Miami-based Crispin, Porter & Bogusky, the agency that created the concept for Domino's, explained that Domino's, in its goal to own the delivery category by providing a pizza to the consumer within 30 minutes, had made some decisions that enabled it to satisfy its "need for speed" while sacrificing the epicenter of the product: the quality of the pizza being delivered.

The agency and the pizza giant conducted focus groups and research to assess the state of the product, which they found lacking, and decided to tell the truth and fix the situation. The focus group feedback was blunt, critical and accurately expressed the way the participants felt about the ingredients and the pizza.

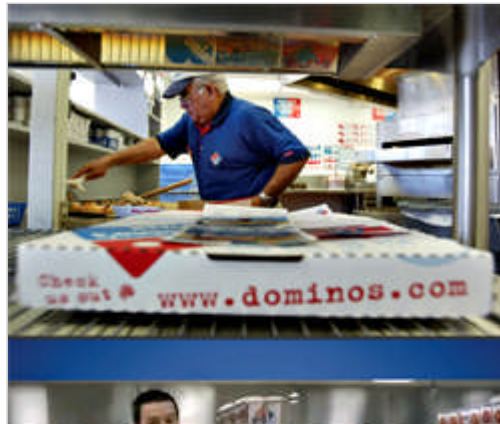
The crust, described as "cardboard," has been improved. The sauce, described as being not much different than ketchup, has also been improved, as has the quality of the cheese. This is illustrated in the commercials, which show the testing being done at the Domino's kitchens and the new, improved pizza being delivered to its harshest critics: the focus group participants featured in the original commercial. After tasting the new pizza, they verify that the changes have been made and that they are back in the fold.

According to Steinhour, trial sales via the offer made with the new pizza are "through the roof," including to this author, who had not ordered a Domino's pizza in almost 10 years. Steinhour also said he has received some calls from other businesses that have inquired about "doing a Domino's," which brings us to the focal point: How can a sports franchise "do a Domino's"?

The majority of all sports teams and leagues conduct market research usually related to a consumer segment: ticket purchaser, television viewers, Web site visitors and so forth. The results of these surveys are treated confidentially and may or may not become part of the marketing initiatives for the following season.

But what if the results were shared with the responding population or even the general population? More importantly, what if the subsequent action plan related to what you found out was also disseminated to the public to assess a reaction or to gather additional feedback?

It could be a full-blown survey or it could be a rather simple question that could be e-mailed to the fan base. When Ted Leonsis assumed control of the Washington



Capitals, he asked his fans through a popular online message board, "If you could change one thing about your experience with the Caps, what would it be?" After reviewing the responses (and deleting all of the player trade suggestions), the table was set for a response by the team titled "You Asked For It." The organization listed the suggestions that were the most popular among the respondents and provided an opportunity for management to share its plans or suggest programs that might address the suggested changes.



GETTY IMAGES (top); CRISPIN, PORTER & BOGUSKY

Domino's Pizza used focus-group criticism as a way to improve its pizza. Then it went back to its critics to test the quality of the new recipes, and then made it all public.

Could a sports organization conduct focus groups like Domino's and create a similar media campaign?

Absolutely, but the organization would need to be as transparent and frank about the findings as Domino's was. One concern might be that the focus group might

identify areas that are not entirely controlled by the organization. These areas usually relate to concessions (price and food quality/variety) and parking (price/proximity/ease of entry and exit).

Thus, any actions would need to be the result of exchange and negotiation between the sports organization and the vendor providing the service in question. However, this might be exactly the type of attention the organization needs to move its vendor to a more fan-friendly and fan-responsive position.

Surveys, on the other hand, provide a little more control, as the organization can design the surveys to focus only on areas within its sphere of influence. Rating scales are common in these types of surveys, and while they generate a rating, they often fall short by failing to determine how important that particular issue is to the customer and by only having a numeric rating. If the rating was a 7, you fail to understand why it was a 7 and what you would need to do to improve to an 8 or even a 10.

Before deciding which course of action to pursue, I would involve a market research company to provide input and feedback on what you are planning to do whether you plan to do an online survey yourself or conduct in-arena intercepts. How a question is worded can be a huge consideration to ensure that there is no bias and that you are directing the respondent to reply in a certain way.

While I have designed hundreds of surveys myself, if I have any concerns about what I am about to ask or want to know the best use of scales, I reach out to someone like Haynes Hendrickson at Turnkey because, as a former team executive, he has dealt with a number of the same issues and lives research every day.

One thing I would recommend to everyone is that if you are doing focus groups, especially the high-profile types we have discussed, always employ an outside moderator. I say this for two reasons: Focus groups involving sports organizations and people's feelings about sports are very emotion-charged, and people from within the organization are likely to become defensive when something that they are heavily invested in is perceived to be under attack. If you want to do a Domino's, "Avoid the Noid" and bring in a pro.

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