

## Sutton Impact

# Investment of emotional capital yields substantial dividends

Published April 12, 2010 : Page 13



**BILL  
SUTTON**

I was listening to "Mike & Mike" on ESPN Radio recently when they referred to a New Jersey Nets promotion about free income tax services as "minor league." First, the Nets were adding value to a team that at the time had six wins and, secondly, if it's fun and the fans enjoy it, why refer to it as "minor league"?

That comment, along with the opportunity to see two of my former students in action, led me to plan a trip to Portland, Maine, to see the Maine Red Claws of the NBA Development League in an effort to see a minor league team that was selling out its games and enjoying success on and off the court. Minor league sports, and particularly baseball, have long owned the position of affordable family

entertainment. What I saw at the Red Claws was more than just dollar value; it was emotional capital that can be reinvested to grow the team and its future endeavors.

My definition of emotional capital includes, but is not limited to, the following elements:

■ **Reciprocity:** The recognition and appreciation of the players by the fans and by the players to the fans. This has existed in very visual forms in sport: The Notre Dame football team walking to the student section and raising their helmets in a salute, or the New York Rangers saluting their fans with their sticks after a hard-fought game.

The Red Claws, particularly at a team autograph session at The Maine Mall, demonstrated their feelings to fans by posing for photographs; hugging and high-fiving fans; personalizing autographs on jerseys, T-shirts and a host of other personal items; and simply engaging in conversations and thanking fans for their support.

Reciprocity is a key element of emotional capital because it leads to sharing and storytelling with others who were not at the event and, in many cases, causes an interest that may initiate action creating another group of fans. Regardless of the level of play, players, staffers and owners need to practice reciprocity by showing fans they care about them and appreciate their support, demonstrating this feeling in a variety of ways. Mark Cuban is an excellent example of an owner who makes reciprocity an integral part of his approach to his business.

■ **Active participation:** This refers to all the ways that fans can support and follow the team, including purchasing and using tickets, buying and wearing team gear, requesting mascot, dancer and player appearances for non-game-related events and activities, visiting the team Web site, forming fan clubs, and blogging about the team and their experiences.

The Red Claws' public address announcer and in-arena host both referred to the fans as Crustacean Nation, a unifying term that identifies the fans as a collective. a



community that provides them with a sense of identity and commonality.

The Red Claws had been selling out their games prior to the game I attended, which was also sold out, but what impressed me was the number of inquiries either in person at the Red Claws office or by telephone about tickets on the Saturday morning prior to the Sunday game, and the fact that on Sunday every seat in the arena was filled; no no-shows. Seats that are sold but not used are the first sign of fan defection and nonrenewal. If fans are actively participating and enjoying their connection to the players and the team, then the likelihood that the relationship will continue into the next season and beyond increases as well. Active participation leads to a connection that leads to a relationship and increasing the lifetime value of the fan to the team.

**■ Organizational approach and access:** This looks at how the organization is positioned to interact with its fan base and how that interaction will occur. Pioneered by people like Walt Disney and the late Bill Veeck, it suggests that an organization should view the fans as “guests,” people who have a choice and have chosen to come to your place of business.

Once again, the Red Claws, under Jon Jennings’ leadership as president and general manager, have excelled and created a welcoming atmosphere (in a building where they are a tenant) by using their staff and their assets to make their guests feel more than welcome. The Red Claws have a staff of eight employees that is augmented by interns. This is large by NBA D-League standards, but relatively small when you consider all of the jobs and roles that need to be filled.

NBA Commissioner David Stern once said that public relations is how you think about something while community relations is how you feel about something. Emotional capital translates that feeling into action and those actions into dollars.

Phil Hanson probably makes the best case for emotional capital on his Red Claws Facebook post: “Thank you guys so much for being there for autographs at the mall today! My family is one big Red Claws fan club, and we were all there today. Myself, my wife, my 10 year old boy, my 7 year old girl, and even my 15 month old baby girl. We made a day out of it (we live about an hour away) and really enjoyed interacting ... with the guys! They are a great bunch of guys that don’t think they are better than us the fans, and I really enjoy what they do on AND off the court. And kudos to all those involved in this team by making it such an entertaining product to watch and follow. Going to a Red Claws game at the Expo is by far the greatest experience I’ve had watching a professional game. And I’ve been to see the Celtics, Red Sox, Portland Pirates, and I’ve even been to both Yankee Stadiums. None of them could even come close to the atmosphere that you folks provide. I look forward to many years to come of trying to make it to the top of the list as ‘#1 Fan!’”

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**Top, there was not an empty seat at the Red Claws game on that Sunday, a sign of active participation by fans. Above, Red Claws players sign autographs and chat with fans at The Maine Mall.**