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From The Field Of

Transparent partnership can take stigma off of sponsorship

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**BILL
SUTTON**

In 1972, George Carlin released one of his classic comedy bits, "Seven Words You Can Never Say On Television." Carlin used this bit as a platform to define the limits of what was acceptable and what wasn't, and to question the rationale of that acceptability.

Given the public scrutiny over sponsorship and premium seating that is raging (especially if the company involved accepted TARP money or some other form of taxpayer assistance), I offer the following thoughts.

My list of what are becoming words that might not be socially acceptable in this economic climate are: luxury, premium, exclusive, corporate entertainment, suite and, to a lesser extent, sponsorship. Currently, all of these words are perceived to connote excess and what the American taxpayer would deem as nonessential activities and expenditures. Why? Because the average American taxpayer doesn't understand the rationale behind the agreements nor do they understand the business objectives that are being served by those activities and the relationships between sport and business objectives.

Perception is reality, and the perception of these terms is the marketing reality in which we must operate. Thus, to change our marketing reality we must alter those perceptions. One way would be to change the names of each of those terms — a suite could become a business activation center — but changing a name doesn't guarantee anything. However, a new name that would imply that something other than entertainment would take place there — perhaps it would serve as a showroom and a place to conduct business meetings — would seem to make sense.

Imagine an area at a sports venue where you could bring a prospective (or current) client for a four-hour exclusive opportunity to spend time together. A place where your brand could come alive and be a part of the experience. A showroom where you could display the many and varied uses of that product or service. A place available not only during traditional business hours but afterward as well. That doesn't sound like a suite. So maybe changing not just the word, but how it is used would be the best way to alter perception.

Those of us working in the sports industry have long referred to sponsorship as corporate partnerships. But is that the way we have sold it and positioned it? Selling a sign isn't a corporate partnership. A partnership implies that there are two or more parties working together to achieve something of mutual benefit to the parties involved.

There has been a lot of criticism about the Citibank sponsorship agreement with the New York Mets and the naming rights for Citi Field. Some New York legislators tried to introduce a bill that would change the name to Taxpayers Field because of the taxpayer monies Citibank received from the TARP funds. It would seem that many people believe that Citibank is paying \$20 million per year to name Citi Field, or essentially buying a sign, albeit a very large one.



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A better explanation could have revealed the Citi Field deal for what it is: a true partnership.

The reality of the situation is that very few people understand the deal points because neither the Mets nor Citibank has elected to discuss them. As ill-informed as we are, can we honestly think that all of those funds are strictly for the naming rights to Citi Field? Do we not think that as part of this deal sportsbusinessjournal.com/index.cfm?f...

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there would be some provisions about the funding and financing of Citi Field that were beneficial to Citibank in terms of profiting from this arrangement and in effect liquidating the cost of the sponsorship?

The issue here is not the sponsorship but the fact that it is a partnership. With a little better explanation from both parties this arrangement could have been portrayed for what it is — a mutually beneficial business deal that will reward all parties for years to come. So it would appear that education and effective PR is another way of altering perception of a word or term that might have a poor connotation.

A final way to alter perception is to be transparent, to create a relationship between a team and a corporate partner in such a way that there is no doubt that it is a responsible use of corporate funds to use a sports context to achieve business objectives. Recently, the Orlando Magic announced a partnership agreement with Harris Corp., a developer, designer and manufacturer of information and video technology. In the terms of this multiyear agreement, Harris will install 1,100 screens in the new Orlando events center, complete with high-definition video production and distribution as well as an Internet Protocol TV system.

“For Harris, this will be their showroom for the sports and entertainment world,” said Orlando Magic COO Alex Martins. “You’ll literally be able to program any one of the 1,100 monitors either independently or collectively through a secure Internet and deliver fan amenities that don’t exist anywhere else today.”

According to Martins one of the more innovative applications of this technology is the ability for the IPTV system to deliver targeted messaging demographically throughout the building by event and by concourse section. Harris, located in Melbourne, Fla., will have the opportunity to showcase and demonstrate its technology through NBA telecasts to viewers around the U.S. and globally. The company also will have created a marketing platform to demonstrate its capabilities to the fullest. Prospective Harris clients can fly into Melbourne, visit the Orlando Events Center to view the products and services in action, use their business activation center (formerly known as a suite) for meetings and then return to Melbourne if necessary for additional discussions.

Let’s remember that words are best defined by how they are used and not by an excerpt from the dictionary.

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