

IN THIS ISSUE
Table of Contents
This Week's News
Media
Labor & Agents
Facilities
From The Field Of
Give customers the right options to turn their 'no' into a 'yes'
SBJ In-Depth
Opinion
Coast to Coast
Careers/People
Faces & Places
What I Like

From The Field Of

Agency approach often reveals the logical business solution

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Print This Story



BILL SUTTON

At the National Sports Forum in Los Angeles in January, I observed a number of discussions that focused on who should be at the table when negotiating a sponsorship deal and how much research should be conducted prior to the initial meeting with the sponsor.

A January 2007 Turnkey Sports Poll found that 84 percent of respondents agreed with the following statement: Team sponsorship sales departments should function less like sales departments and more like marketing agencies to be successful.

If we accept this as a desired positioning of corporate sales departments, the question is this:

How do we evolve from a sales approach to an agency approach?

The first step is to forget, at least for the moment, about the inventory that needs to be sold and to focus on a potential sponsor. Try to assess the company's goals and identify its priorities for the year. This can be accomplished in several ways.

1. Research what has been written about the company and its business.
2. Arrange a fact-finding meeting to identify a potential sponsor. If approached in this manner, the sales department would be selling a business solution rather than existing inventory, although the inventory may be part of the business solution.



Programs such as the NBA's Read to Achieve could be the perfect fit for some sponsors.

This second step would be a meeting of your own team personnel who function as asset managers. In other words, they control or are involved in the management or delivery of venue, team, community and in-game assets that may be part of the potential business solution.

In the case of a professional sports franchise, in addition to the corporate sales department, this group should be representative of the organizational assets and would include members of the following departments:

- Ticket sales
- Broadcast (television and radio)
- Internet/interactive media (Web site)
- Community relations
- Game entertainment
- Hospitality
- Scoreboard/LED programmers
- Public/corporate relations

■ Business solutions

This think-tank approach is an important step in the agency process for two reasons.

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First, it focuses a group of people with different ideas, responsibilities and experiences on trying to identify the best possible business solutions.

Second, it could provide the sales team with inventory and assets that it might not have thought about, including in the proposed business solution.

For example, consider a cell phone resale company as a potential sponsor. This type of business is dependent upon acquiring used cell phones to refurbish and resell. That means many of the traditional assets, such as signage, in-game activities and entertainment, would be ineffective when considered as possible business solutions. The cell phone reseller would be interested in some type of activity that would provide opportunities to collect used cell phones.

The more locations that could be provided, the higher the likelihood the company would be able to secure the targeted number of used cell phones. The community relations director attending the think-tank meeting of the Orlando Magic might suggest using the NBA's Read to Achieve program, which could involve hundreds of area elementary schools.

While programs such as Read to Achieve (and for that matter most community relations programs) have not been viewed to a large extent as saleable assets, in this case, they might actually be the business solution to the problem that results in closing the sale.

■ Who's at the table?

Following the think-tank exercise, the next step in an agency approach would be to plan the follow-up meeting with the potential sponsor and determine who from the team should be sitting at the negotiation table.

In the cell phone example, it is obvious that the community relations director should be invited to sit at the table. Who else?

Consider the Web site manager, who may be able to drive phone donations through the Web site, or the database manager, who may be able to solicit phones from the database.

The public relations director could place stories about the Read to Achieve program and about how the cell phone company is giving back to the schools (making donations based on the number of phones collected).

Finally, the game entertainment director could work to produce a short in-game segment that could be viewed on the video scoreboard showing the program's impact, and also soliciting additional donations of, say, cell phones or charitable contributions to the schools that have been participating.

While that might be too many people to have present at the meeting, it would be valuable to have their ideas as part of the presentation.

An agency approach is about mutually beneficial solutions, based on the business objectives of the sponsor, that lead to long-term relationships.

It is unrealistic for one department to use its identified inventory to provide business solutions for all of its partners. The agency approach encourages organizational thinking rather than limiting the approach to departmental lines.

The result should be healthy for the organization, the prospective client and the bottom line.

Bill Sutton (wsutton@bus.ucf.edu) is associate department head of the DeVos Sport Business Management Program at the University of Central Florida and is principal of **Bill Sutton & Associates**.

Thinking like an agency:

- Take an organizational rather than a departmental approach.
- Conduct an organizational audit to identify all potential saleable assets that can be used in designing business solutions.
- Remember that an agency is dependent on client satisfaction, which is based in turn on business results.
- Traditional inventory may or may not be part of the final business solution.
- Devote the necessary organizational resources to the client (create account teams) to provide a higher likelihood of a successful business solution.

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