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From The Field Of

Don't discount perception, emotional connection with brand

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BILL SUTTON

I have had the opportunity to preview the 2007 Turnkey Team Brand Index (rankings begin on page 18) and have come away with several thoughts: pride in my hometown of Pittsburgh, reinforcement of a number of my own sports marketing positions and thoughts and an initial blueprint of what I will take to my clients and students about improving brand perception.

Here then are my conclusions:

1. The behavior, presence and demonstrated activity level of a team owner affects the perception of that team brand in the local **and** national market.

Case in point: Mark Cuban.

Not only has he turned around what was a poorly performing franchise (Dallas Mavericks) with little local interest into a highly desirable ticket and sponsorship opportunity, but he is looked at in other markets (Pittsburgh Pirates and Chicago Cubs) as someone who, if he purchased them, can come in and be the savior of their beloved teams.

Cuban's willingness to interact with the fans and his ability to poke fun at himself (the Dairy Queen incident and his participation in "Dancing With the Stars") have made him more of an everyman — if a billionaire can ever be an everyman.

It may be surprising to some that the Mavericks are the highest-ranked Dallas team in the Team Popularity Index, but Cuban is an adroit promoter and marketer as well as a great sound bite, so it shouldn't be that surprising.

Isn't it interesting that the Dallas Cowboys are billed as America's Team (No. 2, behind the New York Yankees, in out-of-market following index) but rank second in popularity in their own market?

Other notable examples of owners who have favorably affected team brand through their activities, presence, community investment and general public fandom: Dan Rooney (Steelers), Robert Kraft (Patriots), Mike Ilitch (Red Wings), Peter Holt (Spurs) and Robert Sarver (Suns).

2. The best way to define brand strength in a team context is to look at it as the sum total of everything that is done and not done and the emotional connection that results from that action or inaction.

How important is winning in creating a strong team brand index? Among the top 10 teams in the team brand index, seven have won at least one championship in the past 10 years and two have never won one.

Eight of the top 10 teams in the team popularity index and fan loyalty index have won championships in the past 10 years.

So, is winning the only thing or the most important thing? The Buffalo Sabres have never won the Stanley Cup yet rank fourth overall (and No. 1 in the NHL) in the team brand index, fourth in the team popularity index and the fan loyalty index and third in the grade of ownership index.

The Chicago Cubs, who are ranked below the



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GETTY IMAGES
Buffalo has never won the Stanley Cup but leads the NHL in the Turnkey Team Brand Index.

Bears, Bulls and White Sox in the various indices routinely, played at 98 percent of capacity in 2007 and had numerous sellouts, but averaged only 1,000 more fans per game as a contender than they did in 2006 as a last-place team.

So, what other factors besides winning can influence brand strength or perception?

In the case of the Cubs, I would think the experience of attending a game at Wrigley Field is a huge component of the team's brand. How else can we explain the rooftop boxes across the street and the pre- and postgame gathering places (read bars) filled to capacity for a team that has not won a championship in 100 years?

3. Pride in place has always been, and continues to be, a critical element in team support and brand strength.

My former doctoral adviser and sports geographer John F. Rooney described pride in place as originally representing the area where you were born.

In the early stages of professional sports, players on a team from, say, Boston were from Boston. They represented the town against other towns, creating rivalries and regional pride.

Today, as that is no longer the case, the pride emanates in the fan base: where the fans are from or, to a lesser extent, where they now call home.

In the 1960s, Green Bay was called Titledown, USA. In the 1970s, Pittsburgh referred to itself as the city of champions because of two championships by the Pirates and four by the Steelers — leading to the then-woeful Penguins to change their colors to black and gold in the hope of similar success.

Cities with less migration in and out (Milwaukee, Pittsburgh, Cleveland and Detroit) are more likely to have higher loyalties to their teams than cities with high migration patterns (most notably, Atlanta, Charlotte and Phoenix).

Thus different brand-building strategies must be employed to account for these fans that may have stronger allegiances and loyalties to their "home towns" than their current "homes."

Speaking from experience as a native Pittsburgher, I am fiercely loyal to the Pirates and the Steelers but have easily adopted the Orlando Magic as my favorite NBA team. (I am a season-ticket holder.) I did not have any such loyalty to a particular NBA team when growing up because there wasn't one in Pittsburgh.

In closing, let me offer a few final observations from the study that will merit further study and ultimately action.

1. NASCAR ranked fifth in the branding index behind the NFL, MLB, NBA and NHL, but would actually rank fourth, ahead of the NHL, if only U.S. markets are included.

2. Despite not having won for a period of time, the Pirates, Los Angeles Lakers and Montreal Canadiens ranked slightly below 1.0 (the expected average) but ahead of such recent winners and playoff contenders as the Anaheim Ducks and Colorado Rockies.

3. Teams to watch (brand index will gain in strength significantly): Boston Celtics, Portland Trail Blazers, Arizona Cardinals

4. Each of us as sport marketers (not only as team people but agency and corporate people as well) is responsible for the stewardship of our brand.

Read this report. Learn from those organizations in a position of strength while understanding that (a) there are many factors in establishing brand strength and (b) establishing and maintaining brand strength is an ongoing and never-ending process.

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