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From The Field Of

Make waves, and win fans, with entertainment stimulus plan

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BILL SUTTON

Professional sports teams offer a variety of pricing options, discounts, value nights and so forth, but they generate little in terms of publicity. These options are viewed as ticket offers and packages rather than as part of a targeted initiative.

Bundling all of these programs as part of an entertainment stimulus package (positioning it similarly to the government-backed economic stimulus package) should prove newsworthy. Thus the story becomes a response to help consumers in these difficult economic times.

The announcement of the team's offering of an entertainment stimulus package needs to come from the top of the organization. It could be made by the owner (a nice way to directly associate the owner with a program that should be popular with the team's fans) or by the team president.

The package could be announced at a press conference or through a news release, but it should have some type of event tied to it.

Remember, consumers now are afraid to make commitments. One thing that will overcome that fear is value. Program offerings that combine value and affordable entertainment will serve as the tipping point in the marketplace.

■ Program elements

Here are some program elements to consider for inclusion in a team's stimulus package:

- All-you-can-eat seats. These are extremely popular because they provide a fixed cost for the night of entertainment. It's perception of high value.
- Smaller ticket packages at smaller price points: three- to five-game packages priced as low as \$99 or \$199.
- College night packages: \$25 includes a game ticket, \$10 food voucher or loaded ticket (for credits at the concession stand) and a T-shirt. The T-shirt could have bar logos on the back and the wearer could receive a waiver from paying a cover charge or a special food offer in entertainment district night spots.
- Payment plans: longer payment plans spreading out the cost.
- E-layaway.com: an opportunity to pay as you go. Tickets are released as payments are made with no finance charge, just a service charge.
- Gas and groups: Groups of 100 or more receive a free gas card for use on their trip to the arena/stadium.
- Double entertainment nights: Purchasers receive a game ticket and popcorn and a voucher for a movie ticket and popcorn. That's two nights of entertainment for one low price.
- Family night packages: tickets and a meal. The meal can be provided at the facility or by a sponsor off site before fans arrive at the game.
- Variable pricing on early-season games or all Monday and Tuesday games throughout the season (note: Credit for the price discount should be given to a corporate partner. For example, Bank of America presents "More for Your Money Mondays.")

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Brooks Robinson
Baseball Hall of Fame member

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This opportunity should be extended to the partner at no charge, providing it with more value for its sponsorship agreements.

- Fundraising opportunities for schools and other nonprofits. Many teams have such programs.

Promote your charitable sales opportunities to encourage these groups to sell your tickets and retain a percentage of the profits. For example, sell \$20 tickets and let them retain \$10 to help overcome the funding cuts due to state economies and a decline in charitable giving. Be a hero!

- Come free on your birthday. Disney is offering to anyone who sees the ad and responds on the Web site an opportunity for free admission to a Disney theme park on his or her birthday.

The individuals just need to sign up on the Disney Web site, at which time they are also offered the opportunity to buy additional tickets for people accompanying them to the theme park on their birthday.

The fan whose birthday falls during his or her favorite sport's offseason would not be left out. The seasonal schedule of sports would allow sports marketers to be more creative in allocating to those fans an opportunity to attend, say, an early-season game.



In the process, the program would thus help to move harder-to-sell inventory in, say, NBA and MLB or in NCAA nonconference games while enlarging those organizations' databases and offering the opportunity to sell an upscale birthday package.

- E-stimulus checks: Similar to the economic stimulus checks the U.S. government sent out earlier this year, teams would send out E-checks to their e-mail database.

These E-checks would be used to help pay for the cost of a new ticket plan or group night. For example, an E-check could be good for \$25 off on a ticket plan of \$100 or more or \$50 off on a ticket plan of \$300 or more.

For groups, the E-check could be good for a discount or for a special in-game experience or toward food and other add-ons.

■ Strategic initiative

Different types of businesses in the marketplace are now offering a number of these ideas. Many teams are doing several, if not all, of these programs.

The key is packaging the idea as an entertainment stimulus package as part of a targeted strategic initiative.

Some of you might remember "Mr. Mom." That film, with Michael Keaton and Teri Garr, was set in tough economic times (recession and the decline in the American auto sales industry — sound familiar?).

In the film, the president of Schooner Tuna (the highest-priced tuna in the marketplace and with a very low market share) creates a campaign in which he cuts the price of Schooner Tuna.

He promises that when the crisis is over, he will once again raise the price because it is the best product and worth the extra money.

He closes by positioning Schooner Tuna as the tuna with a heart. He is smart enough, however, to realize that by appealing to the hearts and minds of consumers and by making a meaningful gesture, their wallets are sure to follow.

He also knows that this gesture is bound to generate some new trial users who will evolve into long-term customers.

Show your "heart" and do something for your consumers. As Seth Godin wrote in his blog last month, "Your customers and employees and investors will remember how you treated them when times were tough, when they needed a break, when a little support meant everything. No one in particular will remember how you acted during the boom times."

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