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From The Field Of

Networking package could be a hit with young professionals

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In my June column, I wrote about the current perception of premium and luxury seating. I mentioned the need to educate or "edusell" businesses and corporate entities on using sport sponsorship as a business development tool.

Due to the volume of e-mails I received after that column, I have decided to share a concept I have been working on with some of my clients that will not only fill some of those seats, but also serve as an incubator for developing prospects into buyers.

The concept is a young business professionals networking ticket package, and the key to selling the packages is a combination of education and networking opportunities, and capitalizing on existing seat location to provide a trial experience of a variety of products.

■ Target market

Tailor the program to professionals younger than 35 in the initial stages of their career and wanting to advance through networking, social interaction and learning new concepts that can be applied to their respective business segments.

Since the attraction of the program is networking, there is no need to find someone with whom to share tickets or attend the games, the networking events fill that need. Similarly, because the networking is the driving force, the opponents can be mixed providing a sampling of A, B and C opponents scheduled for weeknight games.

■ Packaging, location, price

Depending upon how many events you wish to create — I would suggest a once-per-month activity that might be augmented by other dates and activities should opportunities arise — most professional teams would create a package including six or seven games/events. I suggest a variety of seating locations at various price points to educate the prospect on the variety of seating options available. For example, club inventory, party suites, loge boxes, and a variety of lower bowl plans can be used to provide a different seating experience each time.

Networking at the game

The program content or the event could include a meal and a speaker or might be just a gathering with hors d'ourves and a cash bar. The program should be different each month to create a fresh experience. A sample program might look like this:

Game 1: Networking mixer and outline of the program; speaker on how to



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Another reason for alternating the seat locations is to alternate the purchasers by rotating them through a fixed number of seats, thus not creating an inventory nightmare for the box office. This also is the enabling vehicle for the purchaser to expand his or her network by sitting with new members of the networking plan at every event. Thus Mary, Bob and Paul might be sitting together for the first game, while Mary would sit with Marvin and Jacquie at the next game, expanding her network at each subsequent event.

Because of the different locations, the pricing can be blended to reflect the various locations, but some of the revenue should be earmarked to underwrite the cost of the

events.

Because it is a business-related event, it would be logical that the events would be scheduled on Mondays through Fridays. The goal should be to create opportunities to meet the maximum amount of fellow networkers over the course of the program.

Since this is a business development tool and would not be perceived to be a pure entertainment spend, there may be some businesses that elect to purchase several of these packages for their employees.

■ Program outcomes

This type of program should accomplish the following objectives for the sponsoring organization:

- Sell unsold premium seating inventory for lower demand games (weeknights).
- Expose a potential group of buyers to these seating locations and the enjoyment and use of sporting events as business development tools.
- Provide some information about sport marketing and how it can be used effectively.
- Attract an upwardly mobile demographic with a strong lifetime value as potential ticket buyers or sponsors.

For some of these buyers, the game will be irrelevant and it will all be about the people they meet and how those relationships will translate into career growth for them. It is about what is important to the buyer and not to the seller — it is about them.

But is this really any different than hosting a postgame concert at a baseball game and watching one-third of the crowd arrive in the seventh inning? Be creative and take chances — don't be afraid to be the next Bill Veeck.

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Speaker on how to network and develop an effective business network.

Game 2: Presentation by head coach or GM about coaching/managing and how to improve performance.

Game 3: Sport marketing as a business development tool.

Game 4: Team owner talks about his/her primary business.

Game 5: Barnes & Noble or Borders' sponsored night; author of a contemporary new business book speaks.

Game 6: One of the team sponsors speaks about how they have used sponsorship as a business development tool.

Game 7: Program is designed based upon a survey of the networking membership.

The team could elect to blend in other activities of interest such as locker room tours, chalk talks and even playing basketball or H.O.R.S.E. on the court (or practice court). There may also be an opportunity to co-op this program (and perhaps secure some type of sponsorship) with an organization in the local community designed for similar purposes or a Chamber of Commerce type organization.

The educational components should be entertaining and interesting and also timely as this is a group that will be technologically savvy and interested in convenience, accessibility and other issues, on demand. Establishing Twitter and LinkedIn accounts and a Facebook page for use by all of the networking members will give them a feeling of ownership and will be essential in promoting and publicizing the concept and the activities to a wider audience.