

Pirates event gives potential sales agents a chance to prove themselves

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By Liyun Jin, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



Rebecca Droke/Post-Gazette

Sports Sales Combine attendee Geoff Burke, left, of Canonsburg interviews Rick and Andrea Lidle of Scranton for market research outside PNC Park.

At the ballpark last weekend, beads of sweat dripped down the brows of uniformed prospects as scouts observed, scrutinized, questioned and evaluated.

While the moment bore some resemblance to the annual NFL Scouting Combine during which football players perform physical tests in the hope of being drafted, the candidates bearing clipboards and affable grins at PNC Park were looking for a different form of recruitment.

Participants in the Sports Sales Combine, a three-day event promising training and hands-on experience, wanted jobs selling tickets. They were there to prove they could get the job done, even when handling a tough assignment like the 2009 Pittsburgh Pirates.

"Ticket sales are the lifeblood of the industry," said Richard Irwin, director of University of Memphis' Bureau of Sport & Leisure Commerce and one of the organizers of the combine. "But professional organizations have no real system for scouting talent."

Thirty-five candidates clad in black polo shirts gathered in the ballpark's concourse a week ago during the Pirates vs. St. Louis Cardinals game, schmoozing with passers-by under the keen gaze of recruiters.

Poised by condiment stands, bathroom exits and concession lines, they collected attendees' comments and contact information, which is valuable market research for the Pirates, said Chris Zaber, the team's senior director of ticket sales and service.

They were hard-pressed at times.

"I'm losing my voice and I've run out of forms," said Frank Hanshaw of Portland,

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Ore., who has been in sales his entire life. "My strategy is to avoid St. Louis jerseys, and I like talking to fathers and sons."

The tactic worked to get the attention of Marc Haas of Monroeville, who was attending the game with his son. "He just latched on to me," Mr. Haas laughed. "He was very cordial, and asked what we were doing."

Though the combine was the first in Pittsburgh, the concept was originally tested in Atlanta two years ago. The idea had been developed by William Sutton, a Pittsburgh native who is now associate department head of the DeVos Sport Business Management Graduate Program at the University of Central Florida.

His inspiration came from the frustration expressed by many teams' ticket sales departments about the superficial hiring process, which typically consists of a cover letter, resume and brief interview. That doesn't offer much insight into how candidates will perform in a real sales environment.

During last weekend's combine, participants received coaching by sales experts, learned about various sales roles in a team's organization, studied ticket inventory and engaged with customers by conducting market research and calling sales prospects.

A high-profile group of recruiters was on hand to watch.

In addition to the Pirates, coaches and scouts from the Cleveland Indians and Cavaliers, New York Knicks and Rangers, Charlotte Bobcats, Georgia Tech, Chicago Fire, Atlanta Hawks and Thrashers and New Jersey Nets were present.

Jonathan Tillman, manager of inside sales for Atlanta's Hawks and Thrashers, attended the last two combines in his home city and came to Pittsburgh's to "find the all-stars." He hired three ticket salesmen from the Atlanta combine earlier this year.

"You get to meet the candidates on a personal level, work directly with them and see how they'll fit in with the culture," he said.

Candidates get their share of benefits, too.

"Sports entertainment is hot, but few people know exactly what the demands are," said Mr. Zaber. "After this, they'll know if this is something they really want to work in."

The exposure to an authentic sales environment was precisely why Cameron Smith, a recent college graduate from Stamford, Conn., decided to attend. He majored in political science but has always been interested in the sports world.

"There's only so much you can learn from outside the industry," he said. "I feel like I have a firmer understanding of the industry and a keener ability to engage clients now."

The event cost \$395 per participant, which covered training and the costs incurred by the host team. The fee did not include transportation, housing or meals.

The candidates culled from a pool of 100-plus applicants seemed to feel the hands-on experience was worth the cost.

On Sunday, teams began interviewing candidates for job positions, a process that will continue in the next few weeks.

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Though the formal interview process began on only the final day of the combine, team representatives started forming opinions about candidates much earlier.

Last Friday evening, scouts watched interactions between salespeople and clients, and took notes.

"He was clearly listening to that customer," Mr. Zaber said as he paused to jot down the ID number on the salesman's sleeve. "He looked at the guy dead in the eye. I always say to my sales staff that you have two ears and one mouth for a reason."

Besides listening skills, scouts said they were looking for passion, work ethic, resiliency, resourcefulness, attention to detail and good communication skills.

In a down economy where hiring has slowed overall, the combine's popularity among recruiters showed sports sales remain hot. "There's a lot of dollars at stake," said Mr. Zaber, explaining why he was looking for fresh sales talent. "This is big business."

The SportsBusiness Journal, a weekly trade magazine, puts the size of the industry in 2008 at \$213 billion. That figure includes \$10.5 billion in sports merchandise licensed by leagues, teams and other sports properties; \$10.7 billion in concessions, parking and on-site merchandise sales; and \$11.74 billion in ticket sales.

The Pirates' sales staff alone seems to rival that of the actual baseball team in coordination, strategy and organization.

Depending on the season, there are anywhere between 30 and 50 employees who go through weeks of rigorous training before they are even allowed to touch the telephone for the first time, said Mr. Zaber.

Employees are split into departments that sell group packages, premium seats and season tickets, and there's a staff that focuses solely on service and retention. To assist, an electronic system tracks sales information to pinpoint prospects using data on where, when and through which medium each ticket was sold.

Bucking Major League Baseball's overall declining attendance, game-over-game ticket sales for the Pirates are "up substantially" this year, said Mr. Zaber, despite the team's consistently losing record and the recession.

"Ticket sales used to be happenstance," he said. "That's not acceptable now. We can sell in any market, at any time."

It helps that the Pirates have kept ticket prices flat, waived fees for a limited time and introduced deals like Dollar Dog Nights and \$35 all-you-can-eat seats.

Salespeople earn commissions in addition to their base salaries, and the market for jobs is competitive.

"Say there's two job openings: one in sports sales and one in pest control. You're probably going to get 500 people lined up for the sports one and maybe five for the other," said Dr. Irwin. "This is what people want to do -- it's happy and enjoyable."

But, he pointed out, just because someone is enthusiastic about sports doesn't mean he would suit the job.

"You need to be a business person first and a fan second."

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