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From The Field Of

Sales staffs turn to NFL's combine model to recruit, teach

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**BILL
SUTTON**

The majority of entry-level ticket sales staffers are hired on the basis of an interview, with at most a little role-playing between the interviewer and the subject. But we have long viewed the importance of sales coaching as integral to the development of top-performing salespeople. In sales, just as in football, repetition and adjustment are crucial in mastering skills.

■ Sales combine

With that in mind we set out to create a ticket sales combine, modeled on the NFL combine, whereby individuals showcase themselves and refine their skills in front of prospective employers.



**DICK
IRWIN**

Trying to fill a void created by the cancellation of the 2009 NBA Fair, we partnered with the Atlanta Hawks and the Atlanta Thrashers to offer the initial ticket-sales combine at the Philips Arena in late February.

The attendees received basic sales instruction, an opportunity to apply and test those skills in a real-world setting and to be coached, scouted and ultimately signed as "free agents" by team representatives in search of entry-level ticket-sales personnel.

The combine attracted 45 sales candidates from 20 states. Representatives from the Hawks and Thrashers, Cleveland Cavaliers, Charlotte Bobcats, Indiana Pacers, Nashville Predators and the NBA/WNBA and NBA D-League were invited to scout the candidates for their own organizations if they were willing to coach those candidates while they were in Atlanta.

■ Day 1

The combine began on Friday morning with sales presentations by Brendan Donohue, Corey Breton and Jonathan Tillman of the Hawks' and Thrashers' staff. They explained the various sales roles in the organization and the skills required for each.

Candidates then moved on to script preparation (which is used as a guide for the salesperson for telephone calls) and role playing as well as studying the ticket inventory and various ticket products.

On Friday evening, the candidates worked the ticket sales tables in the arena before and through halftime of a Hawks game. They were given a short survey instrument to generate leads that they would call the next day.

The scout/coaches observed them as they interacted with the fans. They were looking for those candidates who were comfortable meeting and interacting with people and initiating conversations.

After the half, all the sales candidates were invited to a party suite to watch the remainder of the Hawks game and have an informal opportunity to interact with the scout/coaches.

■ Day 2

Saturday's big workout replicated what would be a typical day for an entry-level ticket salesperson: a full day on the telephones calling prospects. What made this situation unique and a little less difficult was that the candidates were calling the people they had talked to the night before, so there was some level of familiarity.

The candidates were divided into teams to set up a competition. Each team was assigned to a scout/coach, who would listen to the calls and offer feedback and suggestions. This functioned as an experiential interview because the candidates were required to show exactly what they could do.

According to Breton of the Hawks/Thrashers and Marc Jackson of the Bobcats, the combine "provided us with a great opportunity to see the energy and passion of someone still on the phones at 4 p.m. to see if they could maintain those levels of enthusiasm and keep reaching for the phone."

The sales candidates were able to demonstrate not only their phone skills but also their sales skills by selling 16 mini-plans and two season tickets for 2009-10.

After the conclusion of the telephone calls to prospective ticket buyers, the candidates were given another night in the party suite to enjoy a Thrashers game and to begin making their case for employment to the scout/coaches.

■ Day 3

Sunday functioned as "cut-down day" for some and the opportunity for others to be pursued as free agents to be signed to an employment contract.

Gerald Cannon, who used his combine tryout to secure a position with the Cleveland Cavaliers, summed it by saying, "The experience could not have been captured in any sales book or instructional 'How to' DVD."

Tracy White, senior vice president of sales and marketing for the Hawks and Thrashers, said this about the sales combine:

"The opportunity to give an overview of the sports industry, provide sales training, see the candidates on the phones in a live sales environment and then immediately conduct interviews is the most comprehensive recruiting tool we have ever used.

"The excitement of the candidates reinforces the enduring magic of live sports, and their talent level makes us very optimistic about the inside sales class that we will be putting together in 2009."



DICK IRWIN

Combine participant Gerald Cannon used the experience to secure a post with the Cleveland Cavaliers.

■ Summing up

More than six weeks have passed since the conclusion of the combine. More than 30 percent of the candidates have accepted employment, are making decisions or are still interviewing for jobs.

Based upon the success of this initial sales combine and interest from teams in hosting their own combines, we anticipate adding three or four additional sites besides Atlanta in 2010 and possibly later in 2009.

When it comes to identifying sales talent, the opportunity to extend an interview to several days of observation of the sales candidates and a demonstration of their skills is much more effective than a traditional interview.

We are planning to continue developing the concept and to expand it by inviting faculty who teach sales courses to be a part of the combine. The search for sales talent is a never-ending process. If we can identify talent at an earlier stage, we can then develop it.

That will result in a better match between the combine candidates and the teams looking for talent.

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