

IN THIS ISSUE

- Table of Contents
- This Week's News
- Media
- Labor & Agents
- Facilities
- From The Field Of
- SBJ In-Depth
- Opinion
- Readers deserve better
- Explaining digital tiers
- This Week's Cartoon
- Many can benefit from Citi Field deal
- Coast to Coast
- Careers/People
- Faces & Places
- What I Like

Opinion

Sports marketing super powers are within your reach

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Stealing a little of the "Spider-Man 3" movie craze. If there were a sports marketing superhero, what powers would he possess?

1. Super perception and insight for finding and hiring talent.

Wouldn't it be wonderful to be able to recognize talent and avoid making mistakes in the hiring process? As that is not always the case, let's examine two key hiring traits of successful sports marketers:

- Fearlessness in hiring people who might be better than the marketers themselves, or who are so ambitious that they will leave after a year or two. In reality, if the people you hire are not interested in a job at your level or higher, they are usually not worth hiring.

In my experience, great leaders hire great people; poor leaders usually hire worse people and good leaders can go either way — depending on their ego drive or their confidence in their own standing and abilities.

- Diligence in seeking and encouraging diversity. Diversity is not limited solely to gender, racial or cultural differences but also to differences in ideology and approach. The more diverse the work force, the more diverse the organization will be in considering a variety of approaches and solutions.

2. The combined wisdom of Solomon and all the great books.

This super power is more attainable because it can be developed by a change in behavior to:

- Read more, regardless of the source material, to acquire more knowledge.
- Follow best practices.

The New Jersey Nets' influencer program has proved to be an effective and measurable way of using current season-ticket holders to help sell season tickets to their friends and business associates. It has also been used by NHL and MLB teams.

Thus the program has progressed from an idea to a best practice because it has worked. Identify best practices within and outside of your industry segment to improve your decision-making knowledge.

- Reach out to your peers and create a network that can be used to explore concepts and be a sounding board for your own thoughts and inclinations. Seeking out counsel is an age-old best practice. Only a fool depends solely on his own counsel.

3. Super empathy to understand the fans and retain them.

This power also can be attained. The successful sports marketers are obsessed with their fans' experience because they know that is the only part of the game-related experience that is under their control. Therefore, it is the only area where that can work to improve the experience.

This requires not only a consistent research approach but also an experiential one. The sports marketers must leave their credentials and privileges behind and assume the role of fans by replicating the entire fan experience. That includes driving to and from the game, parking, buying tickets and standing in concession lines.

The successful sports marketers must be empathetic to the experiences of the fan to the point

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where they are willing to undergo those same fan experiences in order to effect meaningful change that results in repeat attendance.

The minimum retention goal should be 85 percent because even a 90 percent retention rate means that the organization loses its fans or membership base every 10 years.

4. The ability to help achieve the business objectives of the sponsors and create sustainable long-term relationships.

This power can be acquired by learning how to ask the right questions and remembering that it's about the sponsor, not about the marketer.

Companies enter into sponsorship and licensing agreements in order to achieve their business objectives. The successful sports marketers understand those objectives and formulate a partnership plan that features the sports organization and the business working together to achieve those objectives.

Working together implies an ongoing relationship in which both parties have an investment in the results. The achievement of the objectives by the business usually would ensure that the sponsorship agreement will be renewed and possibly expanded or extended for a longer term.

What this requires is for the entire organization to realize that it is not selling inventory but business solutions. And effective solutions lead to long-term relationships, while inventory that is purchased and not activated leads to trying to find another business in that market category.

5. The skill to practice the science and art of marketing.

The successful sports marketers understand that science (analytics and measurement) and art (style, approach, intuition and people skills) are inseparable in today's marketing environment.

Mark McCormack, in his book "Staying Street Smart in the Internet Age," spoke to the art of the deal. He stressed the importance of using all the tools available to help make the deal, which ultimately comes down to the relationship and communication between the two parties.

Being obsessed with art and science means using any and all tools and technologies available to communicate with your intended market. And isn't that the calling card of every successful sports marketer?

After writing this I realize that all of these highly desirable super powers are attainable. Super marketers like McCormack, Pete Rozelle and David Stern used them to their advantage to create super business environments and opportunities.

Remember, Spider-Man is not the only webmaster and Superman's X-ray vision couldn't penetrate lead. Examine your own super powers and identify and address your weaknesses.

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