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Burton and Howard's last work for *MARKETING MANAGEMENT*, (V8, N1), was in the Spring 1999 issue when they wrote "Professional Sports Leagues: Marketing Mix Mayhem" and discussed life cycle issues relevant to professional sports.

Author's Note: We wish to thank Rick Welts, president of Fox Sports Enterprises and Gordon Kane, director of marketing and brand development for the United States Olympic Committee, for their gracious involvement with this project.

The NBA's Recovery Marketing Program:

An Interview with Rick Welts, former chief marketing officer of the NBA and current president of Fox Sports Enterprises

Conducted by Richard Burton and Dennis Howard for *Marketing Management*

MM: *The NBA knew as the '98-'99 lockout proceeded that fans were being pushed away from the game. While that must have hurt people like yourself and NBA Commissioner David Stern—both of you had worked so hard to build the professional game—how did you start to plan the inevitable recovery process through marketing?*

RW: Shortly into the lockout and before the beginning of the regular season, we began meeting to discuss what assets the NBA could bring to relaunching a season. Much of the attitude fans would have toward the NBA was going to be determined by when the season actually started and the atmosphere surrounding the completion of a new collective bargaining agreement. Because we had no way of knowing that, specific messages were not discussed, but rather we tried to collect and understand the tools which could be utilized by the league, teams, and players. Every department of the league had an opportunity to contribute.

Once it was clear that a significant portion of the season would be lost, we assembled a representative group of team executives—coaches, general managers, presidents, marketing and public relations people—and presented our best thinking about relaunching the NBA, if a collective bargaining agreement was reached. That group critiqued and improved our plan and added new elements, which strengthened it. The members of the group then became important leaders among their peers at the teams in making sure that everyone knew what had to be accomplished.

We all agreed that there was not a "marketing solution" to address the apathy, disappointment, or anger that fans had toward the NBA and its players for shutting down the league. We knew we had to take responsibility for the way fans felt about the work stoppage, and then invite fans back to the game in every way possible. The message had to be sincere and direct. Fans would view a "slick marketing campaign" as a sign that the league and the players just didn't understand the situation.

MM: *You've talked before about how close the league came to losing the whole season. Were there two or more recovery marketing plans depending on outcomes? Explain your comfort level with having to fix the worst-case scenario.*

RW: As the lockout continued, we had to face the increasing likelihood that the entire NBA season might be lost. So, while we had one group trying to plan a shortened NBA season, we also began discussing the issues that we would be facing if we lost an entire season. We got perilously close to that point—within a few days. Ownership was prepared to cancel the season if an economic system could not be agreed upon that would give well-managed teams the opportunity to earn some fair return on investment.

Our conclusion was that we had no brilliant ideas about how to miss a full season of NBA basketball and emerge in terrific shape. If anything, the more that scenario was contemplated, the more important a deal that would salvage the season became. The expected impact on both the league and its players of losing an entire year was a major motivation to get a deal



done. The worst-case scenario was a very bad outcome for everyone involved.

MM: *Once the lockout was resolved, the league instituted some tactical efforts such as free preseason games, open scrimmages, and reduced ticket prices. To some people, that might sound too simple (given the way the league roared back). Put some strategic context around those actions and the others the league employed. What role did marketing play in helping the NBA start the recovery process?*

RW: Every effort that was undertaken was meant to directly connect fans to the players and to the game. The sooner people could focus on the game, the quicker people would find triple-doubles more important than Larry Bird exceptions. Most of the efforts were very simple and very straightforward. That contributed to their effectiveness.

The players had the most important role. Had the players not been as interested in reaching out to fans as the teams and league were, nothing would have been successful. The day the collective bargaining agreement was reached the players told us that they understood and accepted their responsibility in inviting fans back to the NBA. They were true to their word.

We changed the NBA's successful "I Love this Game" campaign to "I Still Love this Game" to acknowledge that we had stretched the bonds that connect fans to the game during the lockout, but that the game was still alive and exciting.

Our Valentine's Day television campaign showed players sending mountains of Valentine's Day cards to fans. That, combined with the actual mailing of tens of thousands of actually autographed Valentine's Day cards, along with an e-mail Valentine card to NBA fans around the world demonstrated an important sense of humor in asking fans back to the game.

We used NBA.com to instantly deliver the NBA schedule to fans and handed every fan in every NBA arena on opening night a CD that included the music, video highlights, the NBA schedule, NBA screen savers, and a new video game sampler.

MM: *What role does the media play when a league, team, or organization must recover from a scandal or stoppage of play?*

RW: Certainly, the media plays an important role in fans' perception and level of understanding of any issue. The electronic media has become key to delivering information immediately. That information can also be delivered directly through video clips and sound bites from the people actually involved in the story. You can talk directly to a great number of fans. The print media can't be as timely but plays a vital role in analysis and commentary. The Internet allows the most immediate and direct communication channel and will become increasingly important to all those delivering news. Organizations that understand the strengths and weaknesses of all media will do a better job getting their message across to fans.

Relationships are still very important in dealing with the media. Organizations can develop strong relationships with key media gatekeepers. This happens over time as a result of being

responsive, being straightforward, and direct. You also need to understand how the media works (deadlines, scheduled programming, tools that make stories more interesting like artwork or audio/video clips) which allows you to increase the ease and efficiency of the media's coverage of your story.

MM: *While the Latrell Sprewell situation in Oakland (the NBA player choked his Golden State Warriors coach and consequently was suspended from the '97-'98 season) was team specific, was there any feeling the league had to recover from that episode also? Does local marketing differ from national marketing in issues like lockouts, strikes, and so on?*

RW: While incidents like the one you described are biggest in the local market, there is no such thing as strictly "local" in sports any longer. Fans, sponsors, and the media all have access to everything that is happening in sports. A league's ongoing role is to improve the performance of every team operation, as a poorly managed team will devalue the collective perception of all teams.

From a communications standpoint, the NBA's handling of the communications process during the lockout demonstrated the value of speaking with a single voice. All communication came from those directly involved in the process as directed by the commissioner. Teams and owners deferred to designated spokespersons to deliver news and information about the bargaining process. This avoided mixed messages and misinformation that would make it more difficult to conduct meaningful negotiations.

MM: *What are your opinions on sport brand equities and the constant damage/chipping away that seems to keep reaching the public? By that we mean, player holdouts, free agency, injuries, sudden retirements (Barry Sanders), big retirements (Michael Jordan), franchise bankruptcy (Pittsburgh Penguins). What does it all mean for sports marketers, and what have they had to learn about managing the brand's equity?*

RW: It means our jobs get harder. But you need to put sports in a societal context here. Individuals and industries that benefit from being objects of public interest also face a more challenging media environment than ever before. The media appetite for stories about teams and players has grown exponentially in the past decade.

When I worked as a public relations director for an NBA team in the late '70s, our postgame news conference was attended by four beat writers, a couple of visiting writers, and maybe one local television news crew. No more. No one had heard of ESPN or Access Hollywood, and Fox was a movie company.

Public figures in all walks of life are scrutinized today in ways that athletes (and politicians and entertainers) could never have imagined 20 years ago. The private lives of public figures are the currency that many media outlets use to attract their readers and viewers. Is it any wonder that our sports figures or politicians seem a bit more tarnished today?

That same media appetite can create opportunity for creating exposure and positive stories as well. ■