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By **Jon Last** Tuesday, January 11, 2011

Even Seinfeld didn't take it this far!

I've always been a fan of the sitcom Seinfeld. And while many of us can recount numerous poignant observations about "nothing" that emanated from the series, one of my favorites was Jerry's comment that at sporting events one is really just "rooting for a shirt." That comment always resonated with me. My fanatical support of the Tennessee Titans was spawned in part by a boyhood belief that the original Titans, ...the "Luv Ya Blue" Houston Oilers, had the coolest uniforms in the NFL.



But Seinfeld's observation is even more relevant today. In this era of rampant player movement across virtually all major sports, we really are rooting for shirts. And those "shirts" are proliferating at a rate faster than a well executed Chris Johnson run.

Last night, many of us watched the University of Oregon unveil yet another new football uniform during the BCS Championship game. As USA Today documented in a piece two weeks ago, the Ducks football wardrobe contains five different jerseys, four different helmets and four pairs each of socks and cleats all supplied by ardent U of O alum Phil Knight's Nike. That's a total of some 1,280 possible uniform combinations. Virtually every professional and many college teams have introduced alternate and or throwback jerseys.

Anyone reading this column can reasonably understand that this increase in uniform variations is driven at least in part, by a desire to grow licensed merchandise sales. Clearly some uniform variations are better received than others. The best alternates maintain the essence of the team's core branding while extending that identity in unique and appealing ways. I'm all for the variety. But I suspect that we aren't optimizing the opportunity. Like any brand extension, the development and marketing of alternate licensed apparel can be enhanced through the application of a combination of art and science.

One of my responsibilities, earlier in my career was to manage business operations for the PGA of America's event and licensed merchandising efforts. It was there that I first applied my grounding in marketing research to analyze and assess the potential impact of logo design variations and merchandise mix allocation on the sales of event licensed soft goods. As far back as the early 1990s the PGA was testing and applying this learning to offer up commemorative logoed merchandise that replicated what top players were wearing during the PGA Championship, while staying true to the event's heritage and making these items available for PGA members to sell in golf shops across the country.

Today as the head of a sports oriented research firm and within a consumer driven marketing environment that promotes variety and individualized choice, it's incumbent that teams, leagues and properties know that there are even more sophisticated research options at their disposal. Concept testing, forced choice experiments, virtual store environment replication, mystery shopping and price optimization are among the tools that can take the mystery out of merchandise mix allocation and yield greater return on investment for property holders and their licensees. These research tools can also measure the impact of dual logoed and sponsored merchandise on the equity of a brand against desired target markets. As a recent case in point, just last month we presented ROO testing results from the initial year of a national jersey sponsorship program that yielded significantly compelling impact for the activating client and their public relations agency. Well executed research programs minimize the guesswork, yet needn't be cost prohibitive. To paraphrase from the opening Seinfeld reference, it should only be the fans that blindly root for a shirt. As sports marketers, we needn't leave such an important proposition to chance.

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