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MARKETING: *sports*

In The Event Of A Work Stoppage, Who's Ready For Their Close-Up?

by Jon Last, Tuesday, April 12, 2011 8:24 AM

There's rampant conversation these days about the impact of potential work stoppages in the NFL and NBA, all replete with much speculation. As marketing researchers, we earn our keep by gauging the perspectives, opinions and reactions of various audiences, but I've tried to stay away from the prediction game. It's counter productive here, and I'm a more-than-half-full kind of guy.

For what it's worth, the opinions of 1,000 sports fans we surveyed in January support my optimism. The majority of these fans do *not* believe that we will miss any of the 2011 NFL or 2011-12 NBA seasons. And the majority of both NBA and NFL fans are hesitant to point the blame finger at either labor or management. They find both parties equally culpable. It irks me that society is always so quick to lay blame and less apt to dwell on more productive activities like getting to an amicable solution.

That preamble aside, I do find it interesting that so much of the conversation has been focused on prognostication of "will they or won't they" coupled with assessment of who is right and who is wrong. So many of the sports marketers that I've spoken with remain primarily fixated with scenario analysis from the sole perspective of the potentially affected sports. While that is of serious and primary importance, I haven't heard a lot of conversation about what work stoppages could mean for other sports and entertainment options.

I would suggest that a number of these sports and their sponsors would be well served to conduct what I like to label as "Acceptor/Rejector" research, so that they can better understand how to exploit potential audience enhancement opportunities in the event of work stoppages. As the name implies, this type of research enables one to compare and contrast the opinions and attitudes of those who already "drink the Kool Aid" with those who have put their loyalties in alternative competitive baskets.

Our January research identified sports perceived to be on the rise or in decline, and gave pause for me to contemplate whether some might benefit from a brighter spotlight should a void be created. I offer the following sampling for your consideration:

The NHL: If any league has learned from the potentially damaging effects of a work stoppage, the NHL should be able to put this to good use in creating a personal connection with fans.

Golf: A new TV contract is about to be negotiated, as ratings rise and we see an influx of young and international future stars, the upcoming inclusion of the sport in the Olympics, and a pronounced industry effort to move beyond recent stagnant participation. The opportunity seems ripe for greater outreach to younger generations and women.

Non-Major Conference College Football: Don't laugh. I recall during the 1987 NFL work stoppage that serious consideration was given towards broadcasting D-III football on Sundays. At a time when the Butlers and VCU's can captivate fans, why not focus on the great underdog stories waiting to be told, and programs that have been publicly devoid of scandal?

Tennis: Combine marketable young stars with an enhanced consumer focus on fitness and time compression with the expansive and aggressive grass roots efforts of the USTA, and tennis could enjoy a renaissance.

Horse Racing: Here I'm thinking less about pari-mutuels and more about pageantry, nostalgia and consumers' desire to return to a simpler golden age. The NTRA is seeking a new CEO and if we are looking for likable athletes, I haven't seen too many horses get themselves in trouble, recently.