


« Back to article (/publications/article/223041/hope-springs-eternal-lessons-from-opening-day.html) Print Now 

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Hope Springs Eternal: Lessons From Opening Day

by Jon Last, Tuesday, April 8, 2014 10 AM

I did something last week that I hadn't done in awhile. I attended opening day at an MLB ballpark, and I had a better time than I expected. Now, let me put the previous sentences in the proper context. I go to a lot of baseball games for both work and pleasure. In fact, I probably can't think of more than three things that I'd rather do than go to a baseball game...and it doesn't matter who's playing. When I read recently of the Minor League Lansing Lugnuts' plans to build field view condominiums into the outfield of their proposed new stadium, I wasn't totally joking when I emailed several friends and colleagues to tell them that Michigan might not be a bad place to retire to.

So, the fact that I had stayed away from opening day in recent years was as much of a reflection on the knowledge that there would be many more warmer days in which to revel in America's pastime as it was my concern that, to paraphrase a friend's pejorative description of New Year's Eve, opening day was "amateur night." My trepidation, from a sports marketing perspective, was that the unique circumstances of the annual "rites of Spring" would amplify the weak links in the onsite customer offering and remind me of the acute concerns that so many properties share in their battle against the allure of the high-definition television.

But as I caught up with a team executive who revealed in the fact that opening day had actually sold out and was far from an operational nightmare, we both asked the proverbial question, "Where are all of these folks during the other 80 home dates?" It was a legitimate question because my in-park experience quashed my initial concerns, and actually reinforced some of the key things that a lot of our research has borne out about the in-venue experience. In fact, it got me thinking that MLB opening day nicely illustrates five solid lessons that anyone marketing through sports, should keep in mind.

1. Make it about creating lasting memories

As sports marketers, we can only do so much to mask the reality that the average price for attending a live sporting event has made trips to the ball park special occasions for most in attendance. So, there's nothing wrong with playing up the allure and novelty of live entertainment. This was my son's first opening day, and that called to light a glaring and growing reality evident in a lot of recent fan research that we have conducted...child-centricity and making sports time a family activity is a critical success factor in marketing any sports property.

2. Leverage Optimism

Opening day is special. It is about rebirth, rejuvenation and the fresh potential of something new and unencumbered. Why should that only be one day per season? What is to stop us from playing up the fact that every event is different, each affording the select few in attendance the opportunity to say, "I was there." And, of course, that expectation of things different needn't be limited to the competition itself. Those activations and fresh wrinkles at each home date present an opportunity to evoke something unique that makes the live event stand apart.

3. Tap the power of "communities of kind"

I've used this space in the past to articulate the concept of sports as the ultimate "brand community." To paraphrase a respondent quote from a recent research with an NBA fan, "There's nothing like being one with the crowd." Live sports is the ultimate communal experience, where shared passion for a team or event allows people to let loose and have fun, with tens of thousands of other like-minded souls. That's a perfect setting for brands to insert themselves in an "authentic" environment.

4. Feed off of heightened energy and engagement

Related to the above is how the energy of the experience can lead to heightened levels of engagement. We've conducted cross-venue "state of mind" research for clients that consistently demonstrate the comparatively receptive environment that live sports fosters relative to other marketing platforms. Additional experimental design work has also borne out how this phenomenon translates into greater marketing message awareness and retention.

5. Understand customer preferences by segment

The prior "amateur night" metaphor and related question about "where do all the fans go after opening day" is a good reminder that we often fall into the trap of assuming our attendees are a homogenous mass. Gauging key differences between attendees can help you to customize your marketing messaging and offers. Seeking input and feedback from each of these segments is an imperative, as well as a great way to show your customers that their opinions are valued.