

Brand identity a reality in fantasy sports

By STEVE BYRD

It has become routine for leading consumer-based businesses and marketing agencies to spend countless hours and dollars in search of ways to create consumer passion and loyalty around their products and brands. And why not? Developing, and maintaining, a strong brand identity can be the difference between a product or service evolving into an everyday life staple or passing by as a fad.

What we've found here at Stats, with proven success, is that fantasy sports and the "fantasy sports model" ignite the passion, interaction and, most importantly, the vast attention of a desirable demographic that activates brands. After firsthand branding successes with the likes of McDonald's, Budweiser and "American Idol," I'm convinced the fantasy model is not only the new wave of consumer brand activation, but has staying power. For marketers, there may be no better way of activating their brand than via a one-on-one relationship with participants involved in an event that evokes their interest and passion.

Since its earliest days as "rotisserie" baseball 25 years ago, fantasy sports has become big business. To be exact, it has become a \$1.65 billion industry that includes such celebrity players as actor Michael J. Fox and rock 'n' roller Meat Loaf. About 18 million Americans participated in sports fantasy games last year, according to the Fantasy Sports

Trade Association, playing everything from fantasy NASCAR to fantasy bass fishing.

Now, leading consumer-based companies are learning to leverage their brands and interact with their customers using unique sports content and games. Further, the fantasy model has seen its popularity extend outside of traditional sporting events. News, entertainment and politics all have potential data points that present opportunity for the fantasy model. In essence, anything that has results can be translated into fantasy games.

While it is safe to say that the fantasy industry is a major component of the sports experience, reality TV has also used the power and reach of fantasy to galvanize an audience. The wildly popular "American Idol" series on Fox offers three different fantasy games in which you choose the order in which the contestants will be eliminated. Winners of the "Fantasy Idol" game receive a trip to the final "American Idol" taping.

When "American Idol" viewers pick their "Idol Fantasy Team" they become vested in the show's outcome and identify with the show (and brand) with more intensity than other viewers.

Another popular entertainment genre using the fantasy model is World Wrestling Entertainment, whose WWE Fantasy Salary Cap

Game has generated a huge following and increased its Web site's traffic before and after weekly televised matches. Again, the vested interest created by selecting a team of wrestlers creates passion and energy around the broadcast.

Just as fantasy games have become a universal component of the sports they engage, major sponsors and brands, inside and outside of sports, have the opportunity to develop their own unique consumer-focused contests. Since many of these brands have their own database of current customers, leveraging the fantasy model makes terrific sense as a way to initiate communication and create interaction among their consumers.

The mass popularity of fantasy sports has helped grow businesses, connecting them to a sport and its fans. This blossoming fan connection comes at a time when demand for consumer loyalty is at an all-time high. Marketers would be wise to take notice and activate this passion behind their brand.

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